

SPECIAL ISSUE



A Tribute to Pema Tsenden (1969-2023), the Life-tree of Tibetan Cinema

Guest Edited by Françoise Robin



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Special Issue

བོད་བརྒྱན་གྱི་སློབ་ཤིང་ཀན་བརྒྱ་ཆེ་བརྒྱན་ལགས་༡༩༦༩-༢༠༢༣ ེལ་
གྲུས་འདུད་རྗེས་བཞུ་བ།

A Tribute to Pema Tseden (1969-2023):

The Life-tree of Tibetan Cinema

Guest Edited by Françoise Robin

Cover Image:

Tenzin Tendhar, བེབས་སྐྱེལ་ཁུ་བའི་བློ་སྒྲུ། Farewell Portrait (2023)

Digital art, 45x50 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Yeshe: A Journal of Tibetan Literature, Arts and Humanities is an open access, peer-reviewed, annual journal that publishes academic articles, reviews, and interviews related to Tibet, as well as poetry, performance, prose, art, and fiction. It was co-founded in 2020 by Dr. Patricia Schiaffini Vedani and Dr. Shelly Bhoil with the support of Tibetan Arts and Literature Initiative. *Yeshe* also welcomes proposals of themed-based special issues.

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Masthead

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Editorial Introduction

Françoise Robin



Pema Tseden, Beijing, 2019 ©Gilles Sabrié

Pema Tseden (1969-2023), a cultural hero for many Tibetans, left this world on May 8, 2023. Some Tibetans made a call that May 8 should be declared as the day of Tibetan Cinema. This gives a good

sense of how he had come to embody the very idea of Tibetan films. As the title of this special issue suggests, Pema Tsenden was the life tree of Tibetan cinema in Tibet, the People's Republic of China, and beyond. He braved obstacles, and there were many considering the subaltern or minoritized position of Tibetans in Tibet and the suspicion with which the Chinese authorities treat Tibetans who claim their own collective space and voice. He managed to uncompromisingly establish Tibetan cinema and reach the best of the world film festivals. He was appreciated and belonged to the inner circles of art cinema worldwide despite his limited English. His networks were wide, and he seemed to know everybody: his fellow Tibetans of course, both in Tibet proper and in exile, besides the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Western fans of films and literature.

Given *Yeshe's* mission to provide a platform for contemporary Tibetan literature and art in the wider sense, it is no surprise that articles pertaining to Pema Tsenden and his works have already appeared in the journal. *Yeshe*, for instance, published an autobiographical essay about Pema's childhood, seen through three pictures. *Yeshe* also published an interview that Pema gave in February 2019 at the Asian Cinema International Film Festival (FICA) (France), the longest-running Asian film festival in Europe, which bestowed three times—a record—the highest prize to Pema for *Tharlo* in 2019, *Jinpa* in 2020, and *Snow Leopard* in 2024. Clemence Henry wrote for *Yeshe* an essay analysing modern objects and animals in Pema's films, mainly in *Balloon*, subsequently delving into religious messages in his movies. Lastly, soon after Pema's demise, Tenzing Sonam, the well-established and widely acknowledged founder of Tibetan cinema in exile, on the other side of the Himalayas, wrote a moving tribute for his

colleague recalling the late filmmaker's cinematographic legacy and underscoring his efforts of forging a pan-Tibetan cinema. Pema was a supporter of *Yeshe*, as he had wholeheartedly agreed to be a member of its advisory board.

To those readers unfamiliar with Pema Tseden's life, we refer Dhondup T. Rekjong's valuable biography of the late filmmaker on the equally valuable "Treasury of Lives" website (2023). It is well documented, with a profuse bibliography. With this special issue of *Yeshe*, we are hoping to bring to light new, lesser commented or known aspects of Pema's extremely rich and diverse but alas short life, and to highlight the many roles he endorsed, living in fact many lives in one.

If Pema's death is a collective loss to his community, it is an unfathomable personal loss to his family and thus we begin the first section of this issue with a contribution by Jigme Trinley, his only child. Jigme, who has pursued in the steps of his father and is becoming an important filmmaker in his own right, was kind enough to let us translate the three notes he wrote to his father on the 49th day of Pema's passing away, a crucial moment for Tibetan Buddhists, as the *namshé* of the deceased is supposed to 'migrate' to his or her next life on that day. Jigme talks to his father as if they were still together, sipping coffee in front of the Potala, and reminiscing about his childhood with a father who, he says, could be as fierce as a wild yak. This may surprise those who remember an ever-calm, smiling, quiet person. But in fact, for Pema to succeed against all odds in his unlikely dream, as he did, to establish Tibetan cinema in today's People's Republic of China, he had to be brave and determined like a wild yak. Totally devoid of aggressiveness, anger or resentment, he was driven by a stubborn artistic

spirit combined with a deep attachment to his people, his culture, his language, whom he sought to present in his films.

The second section of this issue, “Pema Tseden, the Friend and Mentor,” brings the voice of five of his friends: Gangzhun (Sangye Gyatso), the ever-faithful producer friend, shares in exclusivity one chapter of the forthcoming biography of Pema he decided to write immediately after his demise. Gangzhun recalls how in the early 2000s Pema took the firm decision to embrace cinema. A six-part tribute by Lung Rinchen (aka Longrenqin), another childhood friend of Pema, provides an opportunity to discover lesser-known facts and projects that enriches our understanding of Pema Tseden the writer and Pema Tseden the filmmaker. Lung Rinchen reveals that Pema had planned from early in his career to adapt to film a short story of Dhondrup Gyal (1953-1985), the famous Tibetan writer, innovator, and teacher. A piece by Chen Daqing, a Chinese artist living between the USA and China, reviews Pema’s almost entire filmography and underscores the simplicity, sincerity, and dignity of Pema. Having had the privilege of knowing Pema for two decades, I recall in my essay the important moments shared with him, including the time we spent on some film locations, complementing it with numerous pictures. In the last feature in this section, we see Pema Tseden as a mentor through the moving words of Tseten Tashi, who performed in *Snow Leopard* (2023). The actor recalls the filmmaker’s kindness and perfectionism. He provides us with a privileged glimpse into a crucial role that Pema constantly played since his first movie: that of a generous mentor to the younger generation.

Pema Tseden started his public career as a short story writer.

The third section thus includes two essays highlighting his engagement with literature. Michael Monhart, who had previously translated some of Pema's stories and met him on several occasions, elaborates upon the element of silence in Pema's fiction. (Ironically, Pema's voice has been silenced by his untimely demise, and he was indeed a quiet person.) Michael discusses the slow-motion films-like deliberate silences and minimalism in terms of events that unfold in Pema's short stories, arguing that it should be interpreted as giving free rein to the reader's imagination, as we are generously invited to an "imaginal space" created by Pema so as to explore our inner reality more deeply. Erin Burke also contributes to enriching our reading of Pema's fiction through her critical analysis of the short story "Orgyan's Teeth" (2012). She demonstrates how Pema Tseden's exploration of faith and doubt in the modern era can be articulated to address issues of self-determination and identity.

The fourth section of this issue is dedicated to yet another role of Pema Tseden, that of translator: throughout his life, Pema not only made films and wrote fiction but also translated from Tibetan into Chinese works ranging from fiction to Buddhist writings. Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani's paper sheds light on how, through translation, Pema also contributed to introducing Tibetan literature and rich culture to a Chinese readership, or even to Tibetans who, brought up in contemporary China, have been deprived of a full fledged education in their own language. P. Schiaffini-Vedani points to the courage that prevailed in the choice of some short stories that Pema Tseden translated.

Pema Tseden acquired worldwide fame (he may have been the only Tibetan whose obituary appeared in *The Economist* and the

New York Times) for his role as the founder of Tibetan cinema in the People's Republic of China. In fact, a valuable Tibetan cinema had emerged much earlier in exile under the guidance of Tenzing Sonam, but the scale at which it flourished in PRC with Pema's ingenuity is unprecedented. Section five, "The Filmmaker I," precisely comments and enriches our understanding of Pema's filmography. Chris Berry, a leading scholar on Chinese contemporary cinema who had earlier analyzed the usage of road in Pema Tseden's cinema (Berry 2016), offers a hybrid, part-tribute, part-essay contribution that suggests a two-phase division of Pema's filmography. Instead of considering *Tharlo* (2015) as the turning point in his career, Berry posits that it is with *Jinpa*, *Balloon*, and later *Snow Leopard* that Pema's films explored a new path, that of the inner life. Jamyang Phuntsok, an exile filmmaker, reflects upon Pema's "subjective truth," and claims that, contrasting with failed outsiders' attempts at rendering Tibet on screen, Pema Tseden's early films are informed by his Tibetan subjectivity and sincerity, while his later films reveal the tragedy of changes imposed from above. He then goes on to discuss the meaning and value of close-up shots and slow-motion editing that are typical of Pema's cinematographic style. By creating distance and opacity, says Jamyang Phuntsok, the audience is allowed to explore their inner world as well as that of the characters. Tashi Nyima, after recalling the impact and importance of Pema Tseden's cinema, goes on arguing that Pema's early literary works contributed to shaping his filmmaking career. Xu Feng, a professor of cinema in China and long-time friend of Pema Tseden, comments upon the evolution of Pema's cinema. He argues that it developed over the years from being documentary realist to being spiritual realist, reflecting Pema's own spiritual path, informed by Buddhism.

Section six, “The Filmmaker 2,” offers reviews: three are by well-established Tibetan intellectuals from Tibet proper—Chamtruk, a young cinema scholar and specialist of Tibetan literature; Lhashem Gyal, a renowned writer; and Datsang Palkhar Gyal, a film critic. These three reviews were published conjointly in Tibet proper, in the main Qinghai-based Tibetophone journal (*Qinghai News*—Tibetan edition) in 2020, after the release of *Balloon*. It is rare for Tibetan language newspapers to dedicate several pages to film reviews, and the fact that three articles were published together, each offering their reading of *Balloon*, is an indication of how established Pema Tseden had become. We include them with the hope that audience in the western world may be interested in this opportunity of rare access to film reviews from inside Tibet. Chamtruk’s review elaborates on the elements of intertextuality that create a tradition and permeates his films. He also comments on the film’s complex and condensed narrative style, with its fragmented characters and non-linear plots. Lhashem Gyal underscores the affinity which Tibetan audience feels for Pema Tseden’s representational choices of Tibetan life in *Balloon*. He also appreciates how literature and cinema complement each other in Pema’s works. Datsang Palkhar Gyal’s “An Elucidation from Outside and Inside” reflects upon four types of fundamental changes affecting Tibetan society that Pema Tseden manages to convey in his film: changes in women, changes in times, changes in species (or humanity), and changes in film. This section ends with a translation of Baima Nazhen’s (Pema Nordrön) essay on *Tharlo* (2015), a film she refers to in her poem also featured in the last section of this issue of *Yeshe*. Her essay is a personal reflection about the film and offers a glimpse into how, in her case, it acted as a catalyser to grasp social changes affecting Tibet and Tibetans.

A lesser-known aspect of Pema Tseden's life in cinema is revealed in the seventh part of this issue: Brigitte Duzan, who runs a reference website on Chinese cinema and Chinese short stories and is herself a translator, introduces us to the growing role of Pema as a producer and art director, nurturing not only emerging talents in Tibetan cinema but also young Chinese filmmakers.

True to one of *Yeshe's* commitments, that of bringing new Tibetan literary and artistic creations to a wider public, the last section consists of poems dedicated to Pema Tseden. Most were written on the day of Pema's passing, in a state of shock and disbelief. Ré Kangling, Kyabchen Dedrol, Mukpo, Nakpo, Gar Akyung, and Baima Nazhen (Pema Nordrön), many of whom are established poets, conjure up their respective memories of Pema Tseden in their own way with heightened sensitivity and rich imagery in the poems. These poetry tributes to Pema underscore how his life inspire Tibetans, how much he means to Tibetans, and how the loss of his life is tragic for them. Gangzhun, who already features as Pema's biographer in section two, closes the last section with a long eulogy he wrote on the 49th day of Pema's death, contrasting the beauty of the late spring and early summer in Tibet, with the sadness of the circumstances in which he wrote this piece.

This special edition of *Yeshe* is a combination of original pieces and English translations of previously published material. We thank both the authors of the original pieces, who have contributed to enriching our knowledge and analysis of Pema's rich life and legacy and the poets who gave us the permission to translate their works. It is deeply meaningful to hear the voice of Tibetans, who have lost an irreplaceable ally and representative, and to Chinese friends who knew

him well. This special issue could not have been possible without the help of many translators, who eagerly contributed to making the Tibetan and Chinese originals available to an English-language readership. Stanzin Lhaskyabs, Duan Wei, Dorji Tsering, Tsering Wangdue, Kalsang Tashi, Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, Wu Lan, as well as our distinguished poetry translators: Luran Hartley, Norwu Amchok, Palden Gyal, Riga Shakya, and Patricia again, are more than deserving of our thanks. We also express our appreciation to Lekey Leidecker, *Yeshe*'s poetry editor, contributed to the selection of poems presented in this special issue. Last, we wish to express our gratitude to Chris Peacock, one of *Yeshe*'s editor, who first suggested that *Yeshe* brings out a Pema Tsenden special issue.

I wish to associate Pema's close assistant Tsemdo, as well as the young filmmaker and collaborator Khashem Gyal, to the elaboration of this special issue. Hoshi Izumi (Chime-la), my Japanese twin, Kuranishi, as well as Jean-Marc Therouanne, the founder and director of Vesoul FICA festival, Gilles Sabrié, Olivier Adam, Anne-Sophie Lehec, and Flora Lichaa kindly let us use their photographs and illustrations, for which we thank them sincerely.

Lowell Cook was kind enough to review my translation of a poem. A great '*thukjeche*' is also owed to the anonymous peer-reviewers who provided feedback on the essays that were submitted to us, as well as the anonymous sponsor of this special issue.

We are also very grateful to Tenzin Tendhar for the cover illustration. He managed to capture elegantly and soberly Pema's film career through people and objects. In Tenzin's art piece, Pema is shown

with his back turned on us, echoing by coincidence an expression to be found in Baima Nazhen's (Pema Nordrön) poem "Rainbow" in this issue. But Pema's face is bathed in light, which can be interpreted variously. This could be the light of peace, emanating from his noble deeds, illuminating his path on his journey to the other world after he lived a life mentoring and endlessly inspiring his next generation. Indeed, his son Jigme said on the occasion of the release of *Snow Leopard* in the PRC, on 3 April 2024: "For those of us who follow in my father's footsteps: We will take it slowly, one step at a time."¹ Tenzin's illustration reiterates the poster of *Snow Leopard*, with its black-and-white aesthetic, and touches of red, a combination found in posters Pema's previous film.



The release poster of *Snow Leopard*

Last, let me thank the two co-founders and co-editors of *Yeshe*, Shelly Bhoil and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, who suggested and

¹ <https://www.shine.cn/feature/entertainment/2403259561/>

made this special issue possible. Working with them was inspiring and their creative energy, availability as well as their rigour has been inspirational throughout. Their dedication and willingness to bring out this creative online journal, despite busy schedules and various hindrances, are truly remarkable.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of our friend Pema Tseden, and to all Tibetans who contribute to keeping the spirit alive.

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Artist Statement: Farewell Portrait

Tenzin Tendhar



TENZIN TENDHAR, སེབས་སྒྲིལ་ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་བཞེས་སྒྲུ། Farewell Portrait (2023)

Digital art, 45x50 cm

Courtesy of the artist

ཞིང་གཤམ་གས་དམ་པ་ཆེན་པོ་ཆེ་བཅུ་ལགས་ཀྱི་བྲིས་སྐྱེའི་ནང་དུ་ཆོན་ཁ་དཀར་ནག་
འདྲིས་མར་སྒེལ་བ་འདིས་དམ་པ་གང་གི་བཅུ་མས་ཆོས་ཀྱི་ཟབ་ཆད་ནི་ཁོང་གིས་སློབ་བཅུན་རིག་
པར་བཅངས་པའི་མིག་རྒྱང་གི་སློབ་ཆ་འདི་ཡིན་པ་མཆོན་ཀྱི་ཡོད། རྒྱ་གས་ཆེ་བའི་རྒྱ་བཟོངས་ཀྱི་
ངོགས་སུ་དམར་མདངས་བཟང་བའི་སྒྲོར་དབྱིབས་འདིས་དམ་པ་གང་གི་གསར་གཏོད་ཀྱི་རྣམ་དཔྱད་
དང་ཁོང་གིས་སློབ་བཅུན་བརྒྱུད་ནས་བསྟན་པའི་བོད་ཀྱི་རིག་གཞུང་གི་སོར་ཆུད་ཀྱི་བྱས་པ་མཆོན་
ཀྱི་ཡོད། བྲིས་སྐྱེའི་འདིའི་གཤམ་དུ་དམ་པ་གང་གིས་འཁྲབ་འཁྱིད་གནང་བའི་སློབ་བཅུན་འགའ་ཤིག་
གི་མི་སྣ་དང་འཁོར་ཡུག་རི་མོར་བཀོད་པ་འདིས་དམ་པ་གང་ཉིད་འདིག་ཉིན་འདི་ནས་ཞལ་གྱིས་
ཞུས་ཇེས་སུ་སྒར་བྱང་མ་ཕྱོད་བ་དང་ཕུན་སུམ་ཆོགས་པའི་སློབ་བཅུན་རིག་པའི་བྲལ་བཞག་གས་
ཆེན་ཞིག་གི་རབས་པ་རྣམས་ལ་སྐྱེས་སུ་ཕུལ་བ་མཆོན་ཀྱི་ཡོད།

Black and white colors intertwine in Pema Tsenden's Farewell Portrait to echo the depth of his storytelling that fueled his cinematic vision. Against the somber backdrop of black, vibrant red hues symbolize the fire of his creativity besides the resilience of Tibetan culture he illuminated through his films. As he walks away from the world, he leaves behind in his shadow an unprecedented and rich cinematic legacy for Tibetans, depicted in this Farewell Portrait through various scenes from his films.

PEMA TSEDEN, THE FATHER

Notes to the Father on the 49th Day of His Passing

Jigme Trinley

(Translated from Chinese by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani)



Pema Tseden and his son Jigme Trinley, Chumar (Amdo), August 2017 ©Hoshi Izumi

Abstract: These farewell notes are written by Pema Tseden's only son, Jigme Trinley, on the 49th day of his passing, which is when as per the Buddhist belief the deceased passes from this world to the next. Jigme Trinley recollects his childhood days with his father among other memories while he prepares to send him off to his final journey.

Keywords: village, Tibetan words, the Potala, rainy days

I

A long time has passed. The leaves of the poplar trees in the backyard have been rustling continuously. From far away, I hear a rooster call. These days, I have been thinking about a lot of things. I have been thinking about you, who at a much younger age than me, already knew the taste of loneliness. And how you, all alone, have been able to walk so firmly until now. I am thinking, why is it that you, after experiencing so much hardship, still had to rush about for so many people's lives when you could have just taken a break? I have some answers in my heart, but I feel that these answers don't clarify much.

When I was a child, you used to take me for walks in the village pointing out at every object we passed on the way and teaching me how to say those words in Tibetan: pine trees, willow trees, poplar trees, stones, electric poles, motorcycles, cow dung, goat dung eggs. Over and over again. After a while, you would point to these things we had just passed and teach me all those words again. At that time, I wondered why you wanted me to learn those Tibetan words. I also remember the time we went to visit an old man in the village. When we came out of his house, the Tibetan mastiff that was tied up, suddenly struggled free from the iron chain and dashed over. I panicked. You picked up a stone from the ground and forcefully waved it in front of the Tibetan mastiff. The Tibetan mastiff then stopped in front of you. After the owner of the house took the Tibetan mastiff away, you casually threw the stone in your hand on the ground and turned towards

me, smiling, teasing me for panicking.

Tonight, I don't want to say anything sentimental to you; I just want to quietly talk, like this, about your images in my memory. But there is not much time left, just like in the past every time I was about to say something from my heart, I would be called away by other things. But we both know what those words in my heart are.

The family has already woken up, and I also need to prepare to send you off on your final journey. You'll have to listen slowly to the rest of my words some other time.

Your son,

Jigme Trinley

On the early morning of June 27, 2023

II

I have ordered two cappuccinos; one is for you.

I purposely chose this coffee shop where you can see the Potala. If you're not in a hurry, let's drink our coffee here.

I am not sure why but looking at the Potala in front of my eyes, I just remembered a time when we were going through airport security. A security staff rudely threw my bag from the moving belt to the floor in front of me. I demanded that he treat my bag with care and, staring at me, he asked me to repeat what I had just said. Defiantly, I looked at him and said it again. Seeing that we might come to blows, you walked

over to stop me and told me to pick up my things and leave. Once we left the security area, you told me I should learn to refrain bad temper to avoid problems in the future. Yet, when sometimes I gave you similar advice, you acted like an unstoppable wild yak.

Lhasa's sun was fierce today. Holding you in my arms, I circumambulated the Jokhang Temple three times. In front of the main entrance, I prostrated three times to Jowo Rinpoche. On the road, I saw tourists wearing thick sheep fur-lined jackets taking pictures under the scorching sun. I thought you must have been secretly laughing, just like me.

I remember asking you what kind of weather you liked, and you told me you liked rainy days. I was skeptical: on rainy days you have to carry an umbrella and going anywhere is inconvenient. Why would you like rainy days when sunny days are so good? Once I went to Golog to spend the night at a classmate's house to dig caterpillar fungus and I saw his father limping his way under the rain to tie the horses. When he came back smiling and said he also loved rainy days, I think I understood what you meant.

It feels like I have become a different person lately, more taciturn than before. Sometimes I want to try to talk a bit more, but I can't really say anything. The eighth day after you left us, I returned from Trika to where the film crew was. Before filming, we went to the Buddha Hall at the Pelkor Chode Monastery to light butter lamps for you. When we were leaving, an old man told me he was sad for me because I could not keep you company for the full forty-nine days. I nodded and didn't reply. But I think you know what I was thinking. My

film crew friends also knew what I was thinking. My words are just becoming fewer and fewer.

The sun is about to set behind the mountains. Aren't those last rays of sun on the Potala Palace beautiful? I had half of my coffee; how much have you drunk? Let's wait until we finish our coffee to go back. But I need to drink it slower, I just want to stay with you a bit longer because tomorrow you will follow the Yarlung Tsangpo river far away. I don't know when, but you will come back and let me have another cup of coffee with you. Next time don't look for a Starbucks though, we will find a better coffee shop. Or let's come back here. From here we can see the golden roof of the Jokhang Temple.

I remember a picture of me when I was three years old at the gate of a temple, wearing your glasses, smiling foolishly at the camera. When you saw this picture, you smiled and told me that before I had even learned to say a word, you carried me to worship at many temples in Tibet, tied with a blue belt to your back. That was the first time I came to Tibet. Today, holding you in my arms, I pray this is not the last time you come back here.

The sky has already gotten dark. I finished my cup of coffee. Many thanks. Let's go then.

Your son,

Jigme Thrinley

At dusk on June 27, 2023

III

I feel I can't say anything anymore.

Today is the day I say goodbye to you, so I want to find a quiet place to stay for a while and write something more.

I don't know why, but it is very difficult to find a place where you can put your mind at rest in Lhasa. I came to the Gorkha Inn where we came together last year.

Walking further in from the courtyard, there is a simple study room with a few Tibetan-style hanging lamps radiating warm light, and three Tibetan-style wooden pillars standing in the middle of the room. Surrounding the pillars there are wooden bookshelves with some scattered Tibetan books on them.

I can't remember clearly when it started, but whenever you arrived at an unknown place, you always observed the style of its decor with much interest. Then, pointing to some detail you would tell me: "We could borrow this idea for our home." I remember you and mother never consulted me when renovating the house, and often there was something I was unhappy about. It wasn't until I went to college that you gave me the right to design. Although I said that you guys had finally made the correct decision, I also understood that it was because you were simply too busy. During the process, I would argue with mother, and finally argue with you. Sometimes we even quarreled about it. But when the project was finished, you both were grinning and that made me feel beside myself with joy. You always smiled, shook

your head, and sighing softly told me that I didn't know the vastness of heaven and earth. You forgot who raised me to be that way.

Later, I would only say this sentence silently to myself.

It just rained loudly, but it stopped after a little while. It left a sweet scent of trees and earth in the air, just like this morning when I accompanied you to walk around the Potala Palace. I remember that when I was just admitted to the film academy, you and I went to see somebody from an older generation. He told me that sometimes people can help you, but there are things that you must do alone; nobody can cross those thresholds for you. I saw your serious expression at that time, but you didn't say anything.

You were worrying about me, weren't you?

These past days so many people have been taking care of me. I am very moved. We pat each other on the shoulder, and hug tightly. I am in awe of the wonderful people you were surrounded with. I am in awe of the wonderful people you were surrounded with.

On the road ahead, there will be many people walking shoulder to shoulder with me. It will be like that first time I climbed a mountain with you to burn incense; when tired, I will look at the broad river in the distance, trying to identify the location of our home among the densely packed houses at the foot of the mountain. Afterwards, smiling, I will continue climbing up the mountain. There, we will all shout your name loudly, while countless paper prayer flags will float farther and farther away.

There is no need to worry about me anymore; just put your mind at rest
and drink a cup of butter tea.

Goodbye, Dad.

Your son,

Jigme Trinley

On the evening of June 28, 2023

PEMA TSEDEN, THE FRIEND AND MENTOR

An Excerpt from ཡལ་མེད་རྒྱལ་པའི་བད་མ། The Immortal Pema Gangzhun

(Translated from Tibetan by Stanzin Lhaskyabs)

Abstract: This text is excerpted from Chapter 2 of Pema Tseden's forthcoming biography in the Tibetan language ཡལ་མེད་རྒྱལ་པའི་བད་མ། (*The Immortal Pema*) by Gangzhun. He recalls a discussion on filmmaking with Pema Tseden in the dormitory of the Northwest University of Nationalities, Lanzhou (PRC), where the two were students in 2001. Gangzhun reveals to us how Pema Tseden came to define his goal of filmmaking, finally enrolling himself in Beijing Film Academy.

Keywords: literature, filmmaking, Northwest University of Nationalities, Beijing Film Academy

Filmmaking: Resolution and Study

On a day in the fourth month of the year 2001, at around 2:00 p.m., an intense discussion on filmmaking took place between two young Tibetan men in room number 301 of master students' dorm at the Northwest University of Nationalities located in the city of Lanzhou,

Gansu province. On this day the sprout of a full-fledged Tibetan cinema started to bloom.

Those two young men were Pema Tseden and myself. We were just thirty years old then. When I was in third year, writing my master's dissertation, Pema was a first-year student.

That afternoon, Pema visited my room and asked, “Do you have any free time? If so, I would like to have a chat with you as I don’t have afternoon class.” “I don’t have any specific work, except writing my dissertation. I surely have time for a chat”, I replied, while getting up, and I offered him a seat. As both of us were interested in literature, first we spoke about that topic. We discussed at ease about our experiences, feeling and impressions of reading various foreign literatures, our evaluation of these works, and also about various fundamental sources. Then we had a short discussion about literature in China. In the end, we exchanged about Tibetan literature: we started with literature of Tibet, literature in Tibetan, authors from Tibet, and authors who wrote in Tibetan, among other topics. We also discussed about the past accomplishments of Tibetan literature, its present condition, and analyzed and compared the direction it could take in the future. After that, Pema said, “In present times, it is difficult to depict rapid social changes through the art of writing alone. Even if it does, people speaking different languages [other than Tibetan] cannot read them, so this creates a major limitation. If we want to introduce truthful and thorough representations of Tibet to the world, then movies are the best medium to do so.” He continued, “Movie is a powerful medium that unites sound, image, and words, and which is not limited by any particular race or language. So, I cannot refrain my desire to make

films.” Pema’s admission to university the previous autumn meant that we had had the good fortune to both meet for regular interactions and, time allowing, we always discussed about culture, but mostly about literature. In our exchanges, he would reiterate time and again his desire to make films, so that one day I was not so much surprised to discuss about filmmaking as moved by his determination. I said, resolutely: “What you said is really true. If you engage in filmmaking in the future, I will also contribute at my best.” At that time two of my dormmates Thawa Tadon and Dolha too arrived.

Thawa Tadon joined our conversation and said, “If we can introduce our community through the medium of movies, it will bring lots of advantages internationally.” Dolha further added, “That way we can challenge numerous representations that do not accord to reality.” Witnessing our high esteem for filmmaking, Pema was delighted and said, “I will definitely learn filmmaking.”

This is how Pema thus clearly defined his objective of striving towards filmmaking. In retrospect, I wonder if, on that day, Pema did not take on his shoulders a responsibility too heavy for an ordinary person to commit to! We were young men then, so we could not imagine the incoming obstacles. But maybe Pema had already thought about them.

In the seventh month of that year, after graduation, I worked as a teacher at Southwest University for Nationalities, Chengdu. After a few months, I left my position as I landed a job in an American foundation. Meanwhile, both Pema and I continued our discussion either on the phone or in-person. One day, in the year of 2002, Pema

called me from Lanzhou and informed me, “All my classes are over. I am free for a while now. I am planning to go soon to Beijing to inquire about film schools.” I replied, “Okay, if you need any help, do let me know.”

After a few days, Pema came to see me and shared how he could pursue further studies at Beijing Film Academy. I was elated and I sincerely wished him the best of success: “Your dream has come true now, wish you all the best!” Later that evening we had a small party.

In the ninth month of that year, Sir Pema Tseden-la officially enrolled himself in the Department of Scenario and Direction, at the Beijing Film Academy. I gifted him an amount of five thousand Yuan.



Gangzhun, Chentsa (Amdo), August 2023 ©Françoise Robin

Dear Pema Tseden

Chen Danqing

(Translated from Chinese by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani)

Abstract: In this prose essay written in days after receiving the shocking news of Pema Tseden's untimely passing, Chen Danqing, a Chinese American painter and art critic, reflects on what made Pema's films different from those in the mainland China. Chen Danqing commends Pema's unparalleled understanding of films, people, and Tibet, while reminiscing his interactions with Pema.

Keywords: short stories, *Tharlo*, *Silent Holy Stones*, *The Search*, *Old Dog*, *Jinpa*, *Balloon*

Today at noon, I received a short video from a Pema Tseden's film on my phone. In the video, Tharlo, the shepherd who could not get a wife, was reciting Mao Zedong's essay "To Serve the People" in a Tibetan—accented Mandarin, muttering, as if praying, without missing a word. Occasionally, the camera focused on the lamb, sucking milk.

All men must die, but death can vary in its significance. The ancient Chinese literati Sima Qian said, "Though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather."

The video was three minutes and seven seconds long. I watched it in silence and could not help but smile, and then I stopped immediately—Pema was no more. Yesterday at noon, we had all received a piece of news that nobody wanted to believe. It is evening now, and the actor Huang Xuan sent me a voice message. Just two months prior he was in Qinghai filming with Pema. Sobbingly, he said: “I have never met anybody as nice as him. He was like a father to me.” Tomorrow he would fly to Lhasa to bid farewell to his teacher Pema.

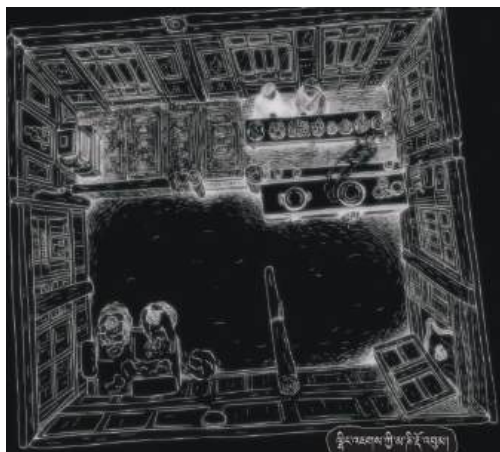
Last year Pema published an anthology of short stories, and he asked me to write the foreword. Even though I had never commented on novels, I did my best to write the foreword, because I love Pema Tseden’s movies, and his short stories were the precursor to his films. I was planning on publishing my miscellaneous writings soon, and when I was editing the files, including the foreword, Pema collapsed. They say that suddenly he felt undisposed due to lack of oxygen and died. He was fifty-three years old.

I love Pema’s films. I do not possess the academic qualifications to comment on them, but I have watched almost all his movies. I am willing to boldly say that Mainland China does not have filmmakers like him. None of the various techniques, tricks, and excitement used in Mainland China’s movies prevail in his films. So, what does he have instead? When I heard the devastating news yesterday, all his movies passed through my mind one by one, including *Tharlo*.

It is a black and white film that starts with a whole recitation from memory of a passage after which Pema starts narrating straightforwardly (why is it so difficult nowadays to find a movie that

honestly and simply tells a story!) until the simple-minded Tharlo ends up without a penny. Since one could ruin this kind of ending if one were not careful, I thought, “how will Pema bring it to a close?” Tharlo rides his worn-out country motorcycle into the mountains, rides and rides until he stops...for what purpose? No spoilers, please look for it and watch it yourself.

His first film, *Silent Holy Stones*, was too unadorned. I suppose no movie theaters would have shown it, but I personally wanted to watch it again just to observe how straightforward the narration was, like in Bresson’s *Mouchette*, Truffaut’s *Small Change*, or even in Olmi’s *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*. At the end, the protagonist, the young monk, runs from the mountain ridge (with the long shot following him from the left of the screen), trotting along, his silhouette sometimes blocked by trees, until he finally jumps and hurries into the temple; the temple buzzing with the sound of prayers. The boy is late. The movie ends.



A scene from *Silent Holy Stones*, illustration by Kuranishi ©Sernya magazine

The film expects an audience as pure and kindhearted as the child (the young monk was mesmerized by *Journey to the West*, the series he had watched on TV). I assume there must be spectators like these. I asked Pema for the audio of the boy's prayers that accompanied the credits at the end of the film—the boy's indistinct muttering. I still have this chanting on my phone. It was not because I had an interest in Tibetan Buddhism, but because when I heard it, I realized it had a brightness in the heart that I had lost long ago, something that was not in me any longer. Later, I listened to it a couple of times but no more. It can be scary when a child's voice like this in a moment can remind you that your innocence has been long lost.

The film *The Search* alludes to Drime Kunden, the prince in the old traditional Tibetan opera who gives his own eyes to a blind beggar. In Pema's story, a film production team finds a girl, who is supposed to be the most beautiful in the village, to play the female protagonist in a film based on this opera. The girl leans on the door and shyly, sings a few lines of a song, so beautifully that it surprises everybody. She says she would only agree to take the lead singer role if she can perform with the male singer with whom she used to work. They used to be lovers, but he ended the relationship and moved to another place to become a teacher. Now she is on her way to look for him and demand an explanation.

The production team does not understand the details of the situation well, but they decide to give her a ride. The man sitting in the front seat starts talking in depth about his own failed love story, while the girl in the back seat listens in silence, lost in her own thoughts.



A scene from *The Search*, illustration by Kuranishi ©Sernya Magazine

When they finally arrive, a young man sitting behind a desk rises to greet the visitors and realizes that she is behind them. After this, do you think that what follows is the impassionate conversation between the heart-broken girl and the heartless boy? No, Pema does not do that. The camera focuses on the school courtyard crowded with students. The lovers stand in the distance, underneath the basketball hoop.

Too many girls, boys too, have encountered similar experiences, but in the film, we never get to know what the two of them said; we don't know if the girl got the explanation; we have no idea if they will get to work together...In the next images, the girl returns without saying a word and leaves with the car.

Pema understood people, and in this scene, I realized that he also understood film.

Another movie that theaters would not consider is *Old Dog*. Did Pema ever read Turgenev's "Mumu"? Flaubert said "Mumu" was the most touching novella in the world, but the fate of the old dog is completely different from that of Mumu. It is not moving. When I saw the old man slowly tying the old dog to the wooden post, turning his face the other way, walking away from the dog, step by step, while pulling the rope tighter and tighter...I stood up from my seat not knowing what to do.



A scene from *Old Dog*, illustration by Kuranishi ©*Sernya* magazine

In *Jinpa*, when the leading male character, that formidable avenger, imagines himself branding his knife, Pema uses a series of fuzzy, slow-motion shots, but in the end, nothing happens. This is a technique that only a filmmaker who understands the classic novel,

who is a writer himself, could use. Remember the driver's girlfriend, the station owner? Pema really knew how to instruct actors. In his next movie, *Balloon*, this captivating actress suddenly becomes a timid peasant woman. If Pema hadn't told me, I would have never recognized her.

In the next one, *Balloon*, the heartbroken girl becomes a nun. She unexpectedly meets her former boyfriend, who has already made their love story into a novel. She so wishes to read this book, but her timid sister snatches it away and throws it into the furnace to burn (the glasses of the ashamed ex-boyfriend suddenly fell off when he replies to the reprimand of the sister). The temperament of Pema's previous works converges with this one to a greater extent and ambition. His narrative, however, remains equally calm. With the scenes where the child holding the balloon runs, disappearing on the other side of the hill, and we see the balloon ascending (such a successful camera movement!), Pema seemed to have found a new dimension in his films—a dimension that foretold the heights that his future films might reach, but he passed away.

Now, I am waiting to watch Huang Xuan's appearance in *Stranger*, Pema's posthumous work. Huang Xuan said that he shed tears during a series of shots filming a mountain range. Is he saying that maybe he was somehow crying in advance for Pema's demise? Today at noon, Huang Xuan sent a voice message saying that he saw Pema behind a cloth curtain (very peaceful, as if he were asleep). Starting tomorrow, a lot of people will crowd around Pema and after praying, they will circumambulate Lhasa. Tibetans think that to pass away in Lhasa represents the highest form of contentment.

Among all the film directors I have met, it was Pema's calm, introvert, and modest disposition as well as appearance that was most reminiscent of an intellectual. He poured into his films all his imagination and inner world, together with a vision of Tibet informed by what he had learned in the mainland. I saw him in every one of his characters. Many times, while seated from across him, I asked myself what his brain was thinking at that moment. After the public screening of *Balloon*, I asked him: "How did you manage to film the sheep mating? It must have been very difficult." He softly replied: "It was OK. I found a way." I asked him what books he read, and he said books that were not related to literature and film. I asked what movies he watched when he was a child in his village, and he mentioned Chaplin. Ah, Chaplin! I then realized why he understood and was so loyal to the soul of the common folk, and how he could render it not through the exaggeration of its sorrows, but in a way that made people smile with candor and kindness. The moments when I smiled in his films were those that permeated Pema's characteristic calm, introversion, and modesty.

Pema mentored several young people who have become film directors as well, including his successful son. This must be such a difficult time for them. And there will still be painful days ahead. It was Pema who let Tibet be heard and be seen. That half of the story he told will of course continue, but Pema will no longer narrate it.

His demeanor standing there, so kind, so good-looking. In 2021, Pema came all the way to the suburbs of Beijing to see my Tibetan group art exhibit. I did not feel honored; on the contrary, I felt ashamed. Those paintings are just but a mere glimpse of Tibet because

my knowledge of the Tibetan plateau is very superficial. Pema's films are the real flesh and blood of Tibet. A nation taking its own films to face the world with unspeakable countenance and dignity. Pema was the pioneer in embodying this dignity.

May 9-10, 2023.

(The Chinese version of the essay was published on the website of Tengxun Holdings Limited.)

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This Half of the Story Will be Remembered for a Long Time

Lung Rinchen

(Translated from Chinese by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani)

Abstract: In this six-tiered prose essay, Lung Rinchen writes about his disbelief and how the news of Pema Tseden's demise came to him, his trip to Hoh Xil with Pema Tseden highlighting the difficulties of altitude, their meeting with Dhondup Gyal and how this literary giant influenced Pema Tseden, the recurrent folk element in Pema films, his travel with the actress Yangshik Tso to Lhasa to pay their last respects to Pema Tseden, and the new generation filmmakers' responsibility to tell the rest half of the story.

Keywords: altitude, Hoh Xil trip, Dhondup Gyal, Tibetan popular culture, new generation

“I Also Think It Can't Be True”

The ANU group, which became popular on the internet with their song “Fly,” is originally from Nangchen, Yushu (Qinghai province). Zhang Yimou liked this song, and he featured it at the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics. As a result, they became famous and started to appear frequently in various talent shows.

Glory and failure, however, come and go. It is like riding a roller coaster: a succession of ups and downs, surprises and dangers. After years of much work, they realized that they were getting further and further away from their original musical dream. That is when they heard the call from their birthplace.

In 2022, Gongba, one of the members of ANU, returned to Nangchen to fund a culture and art school. They invited me to participate in the opening ceremony of the school on May 8, 2023. On the morning of May 8, I took a plane from Xining to Bathang Airport in Yushu. When the airplane landed and I had a phone signal again, dozens of missed calls popped up on my screen. It surprised me and I did not know what was going on until I read a WeChat message from a friend asking: “I heard something bad happened to Pema Tseden in Lhasa. Do you know something about it?” For a moment, I was petrified. My first reaction was to think it was fake news; an unscrupulous trick made up by an unethical blogger to gain internet attention. But then my mood turned bleak. I mechanically followed the crowd of people outside the airport. The friend who came to pick me up had brought a *khata* to greet me, but I was completely distracted so I don’t remember how the *khata* ended up around my neck or how I got into the car. When I realized where I was, the car was already in the middle of the vast wilderness, heading to Nangchen. I spoke to the driver: “It seems that something bad has happened to the film director Pema Tseden.” Then, realizing that I was talking to him in Amdo Tibetan, I made an effort to repeat the sentence in Kham Tibetan. The driver moved his head towards me abruptly and said in Chinese: “That’s not possible.” The driver’s words gave me some comfort. I nodded and answered: “I also think it can’t be.”

The cell phone signal was intermittent, but when we crossed a village, the phone gave notification alerts for missed calls and messages. I opened my WeChat friend groups and they were all full of images of Pema Tseden. I hastily closed WeChat. The little comfort I had felt earlier turned into anxiety again. I turned off the phone.

When we got to Nangchen, Gongba and other friends were waiting for us at the entrance of a Tibetan restaurant. Once I got off the car, I looked at Gongba and said: “Terrible news today. It seems that something bad happened to Pema Tseden.” He looked terrified for a moment but then said: “Let’s eat something first.” At the restaurant, I felt restless. I had to be a good guest, but a couple of times excused myself pretending to go to the restroom only to pace back and forth around the restaurant not daring to turn on my phone. They must have realized that I was anxious, because after the fourth or fifth time that I left the table, all stood up and asked me if I wanted to go to the hotel to rest.

At the hotel, after my friends had left, I closed the door and turned on the phone. More alerts of missed calls and messages beeped while a call was coming through. When I pressed the answer button, I could hear a real Amdo voice asking: “Teacher, where are you?”

“I am in Yushu,” I said.

“Did you see the news on the internet?”

“I saw them, but I did not have the courage to read them,” I answered, and as I was saying this my voice choked with sobs. I heard him crying loudly on the other end.

I laid down in the hotel room, my mind full of many memories of Pema and I. In those spotted and inconsequential memories, Pema

was either quietly seated in front of me or walking by my side silently with a smile.

The Trip to Hoh Xil

In 2018, when Pema was done filming *Jinpa*, he returned to Xining and met me at a Tibetan restaurant. That day, as I walked towards the Tibetan restaurant entrance, I saw Pema seated on a bench on the side of the road, quietly waiting for me. His grey hair unkept for a long time, his thin face darkened by the ultraviolet rays of the high plateau sun. As I approached, he stood up smiling, and gave me a handshake. Seeing his aged and meager look, my heart felt sorry for him. In a blaming tone, I solemnly said: “In future, you should not work at such high altitude!” As serene as before, he smilingly said: “Let’s eat first!”

Most of *Jinpa* was filmed on the edge of Hoh Xil, at an altitude of some 4,500 meters. At that time both of us were over half a century old and had been suffering from diabetes for many years. At dinner that day we talked about age and altitude, and we both agreed that from now on we should avoid going to altitudes above 4,000 meters.

Not long after that, I received an invitation from the Hoh Xil Forest Safety Department. They were hoping I could make a trip to Hoh Xil to collect local cultural materials and follow them while they were patrolling the mountains. The idea was to experience and write about their life and work. The Hoh Xil Safety Department originated from the Wild Yak Squadron of the 1980s, and they continue patrolling the mountains just as its founder Kesang Sonam Dargye did. They

have been carrying the tradition of protecting Hoh Xil until this day. I gladly accepted, but they also wanted me to extend the invitation to Pema Tseden, which made things a bit difficult for me. “I will try,” I told them.

That night, I called Pema and told him about the invitation from the Hoh Xil Forest Safety Department. He agreed without hesitation. I immediately told the news to them, and they were thrilled. I received the invitation in March or so. Two months later, Pema called me asking about the trip to Hoh Xil. As soon as I hung up the phone, I called the Hoh Xil Forest Safety Department, who immediately made arrangements. On May 16, our trip to Hoh Xil became a reality. In three pickup trucks, a group of eight of us, composed of five members of the mountain patrol, Pema, his assistant Tsedor, and I departed from Golmud toward the Sonam Dorje Protection Station, the first stop of the Hoh Xil Mountain Patrol. And thus, Pema and I together violated the mutual agreement that we had made not long ago.

On this trip to Hoh Xil, we encountered almost all the challenges and difficulties that a mountain patrol could face: rain and snow, muddy roads, cars getting stuck in the mud more than ten times a day...The worst day was the one we had to drive on a terrain that did not resemble a road at all. Jolting and moving around, one pickup truck getting stuck, the other pickup truck towing, continuously having to go back and forth to try to find a viable path. For a whole day, from 9:00 AM to 11:00 PM, we drove less than 20 kilometers. And of course, there were also camping on rainy and snowy days, eating instant noodles in cold water...We didn't want to throw away empty bottles of mineral water, so we filled them up again with any potable water we could find to use later.

We also saw Hoh Xil in all its magnificence: flocks of Tibetan antelopes rushing to Hoton Nor Lake to give birth; wild Tibetan donkeys walking leisurely, like gentlemen; and wild yaks, lonely and resolute, standing proudly on the snow.

During the trip to Hoh Xil, the life stories of these five mountain patrol members became for us a rich mine of creative source materials. When we had free time, we chatted with these rangers and listened to their vivid stories. We collected numerous audio recordings, videos, and interview notes. We realized that these men were no longer the ‘wild yak team’ of Sonam Dorje’s times. They were well-trained and strictly disciplined. In Hoh Xil, where almost no shots had been heard in more than ten years, they were not dealing with poachers and illegal miners any longer. They had a wider vision and a vast array of interests and hobbies. Among these mountain patrol rangers there were singers, poets, and calligraphers. In their conversations, Hoh Xil appeared broader and deeper. Pema and I decided that we had to facilitate creative opportunities for them, even if it was just writing song lyrics for the singers, recommending their poems to be published in literary magazines, or introducing a good calligraphy master to the rangers, who loved calligraphy.

However, the work had just started, as the story is only half told...²

² In this essay, the author frequently refers to stories that are “only half told” (故事只讲了一半) alluding to the title of one of the short-story anthologies that Pema Tsenden published in China. (CITIC Press Group, 2022).

Meeting with Teacher Dhondup Gyal

While we were collecting cultural materials in Hoh Xil, Pema and I often talked about the past. We had known each other for over forty years. When we were young, we had studied together at the Qinghai's Hainan Prefecture Nationalities Normal School. This school was located in Gonghe county, in the small town of Chabcha. Both of us were literature lovers, thus every weekend went to the county cultural center to read. The cultural center had a reading room with a subscription to literary magazines such as *People's Literature*, *Harvest*, *October*, and *Contemporary Era*. We were constantly flipping such magazines, and from them we became acquainted with many contemporary writers and their works. We visited the cultural center so frequently that all the staff members knew us. At that time, becoming a writer was our common dream.

As luck would have it and to our surprise, we found a professor who wrote novels at our own school. Professor Dhondup Gyal, who had started to write when he was a student, was suddenly transferred from the Central Nationalities Institute in Beijing (later renamed Central Nationalities University) to teach at our small town's school. We had already read in magazines many of the literary works he had penned or translated. His works created a new literary wave in the Tibetan literary milieu. People in the profession said that he was “the Tibetan Lü Xun,” or that “until that moment no other writer writing in Tibetan could compare to him.” He and his works had a great impact on both of us. Even though he was teaching other students back then, Pema and I would still sit in his classes. It was because of his influence that we went from merely reading literature

to relishing the writing of literature. It felt much like savoring the refreshing taste of new snow.

How deeply influenced by Dhondup Gyal was Pema Tseden? Pema's first movie, *Silent Holy Stones*, was filmed in a small village of Chentsa county, Dhondup Gyal's hometown. That year, the film won the Golden Rooster Award for First Debut Film. When journalists interviewed Pema asking the reason for the location, he answered: "It was to pay homage to Professor Dhondup Gyal, who brought me to this literary and artistic path."

After *Silent Holy Stones*, Pema proposed to adapt Dhondup Gyal's novels to the big screen. He had just graduated from the Pekin Film Academy and came to discuss this issue with me. He invited me to join him in translating into Chinese Dhondup Gyal's works. I immediately agreed and began the translation which took me a year or so to complete, a manuscript of some 20,000 Chinese characters. By that time, Pema was already working on new movies at the speed of a movie every one or two years, so he quickly made a name for himself with his Tibetan-language films and established his own unique identity within the Chinese film industry. Perhaps due to him being too busy, the project of taking Dhondup Gyal's works to the big screen got stranded, becoming "a story half told." My translation of the *Anthology of Dhondup Gyal's Novels* was published by the Qinghai Nationalities Publishing House and the Sichuan People's Publishing House.

The Recurrent Folk Element

From *Silent Many Stones* on, Pema's films traversed Tibetan

popular culture on their road to the world. However, his films have always been thoroughly characterized by a strong folk culture flavor.

In *Silent Many Stones*, this popular trait connecting the film from beginning to end is the story of *Journey to the West*. In the movie, the young monk brings the TV set and VCR player from his home to the monastery to share the series of *Journey to the West* with his master and the young tulku. *Journey to the West* is known to the Tibetan people as *The Biography of the Monk Tangseng*. In Tibet, it has a long history and has circulated widely as a folktale. The purpose of this story in the film is not only to be a thread but also to generate a warm affinity among Tibetans. People see themselves in his films: the kinds of stories, environment, and situations almost seamlessly linked to their real lives, so they feel that his movies are in part an extension of their lives. Each scene and each actor's line elicit from them a knowing smile. Watching Pema's movies make audiences reflect on their past, or maybe experience once again those familiar feelings of a dim and yet glimmering past life.

This disposition towards focusing on the people was perhaps learned from our teacher Dhondup Gyal. The folk character of Dhondup Gyal's novels is a subject always discussed by literary critics. Pema also very much treasured the popular. He made his works thread their way through people's earth, permeated by the scent of mud and grass. Pema even saw this creative endeavor as a kind of pilgrimage, a pilgrimage to the folk. We can see this cherished, pious pilgrimage in nearly all his films. But the popular character of this walk changes constantly in every film. If we say that *Silent Holy Stones* expresses his adherence to folk literature, in *The Search* folk culture is the old

inheritance that reality has discarded and needs to find. In this film, the traditional opera “Drimé Kunden” appears scattered and fragmented, simple and vague—a metaphor for the last refuge of a folk culture that is dying under the pressure of the contemporary discourse. When we get to *Old Dog*, the lonely and yet noisy Gesar epic storytelling becomes the movie’s soundtrack.

This folk trait shines in almost all of Pema’s movies. For example, in *The Sacred Arrow*, it is the story of King Langdarma’s assassination at the hands of Lhalung Pelgyi Dorje; in *Tharlo*, it is the *layi* traditional love songs the protagonist Tharlo constantly sings; in *Balloon*, it is the popular belief in reincarnation; in *Jinpa*, it is an inherited culture of assassination for revenge...

One After Another, Scenes from the Past

Maybe because of the high altitude or because of the sad news of Pema’s passing, I felt extremely anxious. The night I spent in Nangchen I could not sleep until dawn. In the early morning, I got up and opened the curtains. It was snowing outside. The fluttering, heavy snow was slowly purifying the county town. The mountain range in the distance was already covered by snow. In the streets, the thinly spread sprouted trees were already wrapped in silver. This expansive whiteness seemed to mirror the grief felt by heaven and earth for the passing of an outstanding Tibetan son. At this moment, I made a bold and extremely embarrassing decision. I would not take part in today’s opening ceremony. I would rush to Lhasa to see Pema and bid farewell to him.

The actress Yangshik Tso had also been invited to participate in today's opening ceremony. She had roles in many of Pema's films. In *Silent Holy Stones*, she played the role of the monk's sister. In *Tharlo*, she was the main female character. She gained wide recognition for playing the role of a Buddhist nun in *Balloon*. That morning, Yangshik Tso also made the difficult decision of withdrawing from the performance of the school's opening ceremony and coming with me to Lhasa. It is forbidden for Tibetans to amuse themselves in times of mourning, let alone if the departed is your mentor...The school administrators were very reasonable and completely understood how we felt, but Yangshik Tso and I still felt very sorry. In private, we discussed this issue and agreed that we had to repay in earnest the favor we owed to the school. We bought a plane ticket to Lhasa via Xining and left.

On the plane, memories of small details of our past flooded back to me. Starting from that reading room in Chabcha, Pema and I had shared so many experiences. At the end of the 1990s, I was working at the Qinghai TV station. When they created a film and television division, since I had published a few novels, they transferred me there to write film and television scripts. I thought that writing novels and scripts were two very different things, so I asked them to give me an opportunity to learn the craft first. After I was given the permission, I immediately called Pema to share the news. At that time, he was already studying at the Beijing Film Academy. He wholeheartedly supported me and invited me to go to Beijing with him. In Beijing, I lived at the apartment he was renting, went with him to class, and tried to write a literary film script. I wrote a paragraph, and he corrected it, and so on. This is how paragraph by paragraph I finally finished this script. I had basically passed the scriptwriting test.

Later on, Pema and I co-wrote a script that we published in the journal *Chinese Writers*. Although this script won the Qingke Literary Prize and the Yingxiong Ernü Film Script Prize, due to various reasons we never got to make it into a film—another half-told story.

In 2016, the Lùxun Literary Institute and the Huacheng Publishing House jointly conducted a discussion of the work that Pema and I had written together in Beijing. The critics gathered there gave our work the highest marks. To this day I remember the comments made by professor He Shaojun: “Pema Tseden emphasizes narrative, rationality, and wisdom, while Lung Rinchen leans towards lyricism, the emotional, and the poetic.”

The Other Part of the Story Needs Young People to Complete It

The connection that Pema and I had was never severed. Just on the 27th of last month,³ Pema called me to discuss a movie script. He told me that on May 1 he was going to Lhasa. I answered: “Then, let’s meet when we have a chance.” He replied: “For sure.” Nobody could have imagined that our next meeting would actually be to say goodbye forever.

For the last few years, Pema’s movies have been filmed higher and higher above sea level. After *Jinpa*, all his movies were shot at altitudes above 4,000 meters. This is the case of *Snow Leopard* and *Stranger*. The film that was being shot in Central Tibet [for which he

³ The author is referring here to April 27, 2023

flew on the 1st May] was directed by Pema's son Jigme Trinley, an emerging and talented filmmaker. The location was Nagartse county, at an altitude above 4,500 meters.

Pema was like an eagle, yearning for higher places; yearning to take off from a height to soar even higher into the sky.

Lhasa is the objective of a long and arduous pilgrimage for pious Buddhist Tibetans. Pema's pilgrimage has unexpectedly arrived at its final destination, but the other half of the story is yet to be told. A new generation of Tibetan filmmakers needs to carry on telling it. In recent interviews, I have been asked about the future of Tibetan cinema. I answered that if we compare the movies made by the new generation of filmmakers like Jigme Trinley, Pema Tsedon's son, with those of the previous generation, these new films have more genre-based and market-oriented elements. They are the ones narrating now the other half of the story of Tibetan cinema.

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Lung Rinchen (left) and Pema Tseden (right), Xining, August 2017 ©Françoise Robin

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“Now, we can now tell Tibetan stories:” Portrait of the Filmmaker as an Old Friend

Françoise Robin

Abstract: Pema Tsenden managed to make a certain ‘Tibetan dream’ come true: creating almost from scratch and fostering a Tibetan cinema without compromise under the vigilant and suspicious eye of the Chinese state. He proved that Tibetan cinema by Tibetans was not only possible, countering the usual narrative of backwardness attached by the state to Tibetans in the PRC, but also that it could be celebrated internationally. This essay is an overview of the author’s almost two decades of friendship and work with Pema Tsenden on his films. It testifies to Pema’s constant engagement and commitment to making a Tibetan film scene emerge and discloses a few lesser-known aspects of his life and career. It is abundantly illustrated with photographs.

Keywords: Pema Tsenden, Tibetan cinema, minor cinema, Venice Film Festival

Pema Tsenden dedicated the second half of his brief life to materialize Tibetan cinema, and he also set high-quality standards for Tibetans and other filmmakers in the PRC (see Duzan in this issue of *Yeshe*). It is my privilege to have a mutual friendship and professional collaboration with him for over twenty years. Personal memories can

be as boring as an endless slide, watching the evening upon a friend's return from a trip. Verging on the anecdote is always a risk. With that possible pitfall in mind, I have focused here on glimpses, snapshots, and snippets, through which readers will, or so it is hoped, get a better idea of the Tibetan cinema scene that Pema strived to establish from nascency, and also know him better as a person.

Pema Tseden and I met first in Xining in 2002 when I was in the third year of my Ph.D in contemporary Tibetan literature. I found his writings intriguing and interesting, somehow different, setting him apart from other writers. They were more contained, more subtle, more enigmatic. A short story in particular, "Let's go to Tsethang" (Tib. *Rtse thang la 'gro*, published in the early 2000s), had struck me: a group of young Amdowas, traveling to Lhasa and Tsethang (the cradle of Tibetan empire), came across young Han Chinese Tibet-enthusiasts.⁴ Reflecting upon this short story, its content seems to indicate Pema's early interest for introducing Tibetan culture from a Tibetan perspective to an open-minded Han Chinese intellectual and artistic audience. We thus met through a mutual friend of his—the tightknit intellectual scene in Amdo, as in most places in Tibet, makes contacts very easy. Pema Tseden, a quiet, peaceful, and thoughtful young man, struck me then as someone more eager to share his hopes and dreams about Tibetan cinema than his literary career. He even mentioned that he was aiming at the Cannes Film Festival someday. Not knowing that he had already engaged into cinema, I was taken aback and, I must confess, thought he was totally unrealistic. I should have known better:

⁴ It can be found in Padma tshe brtan 2009: 284-298.

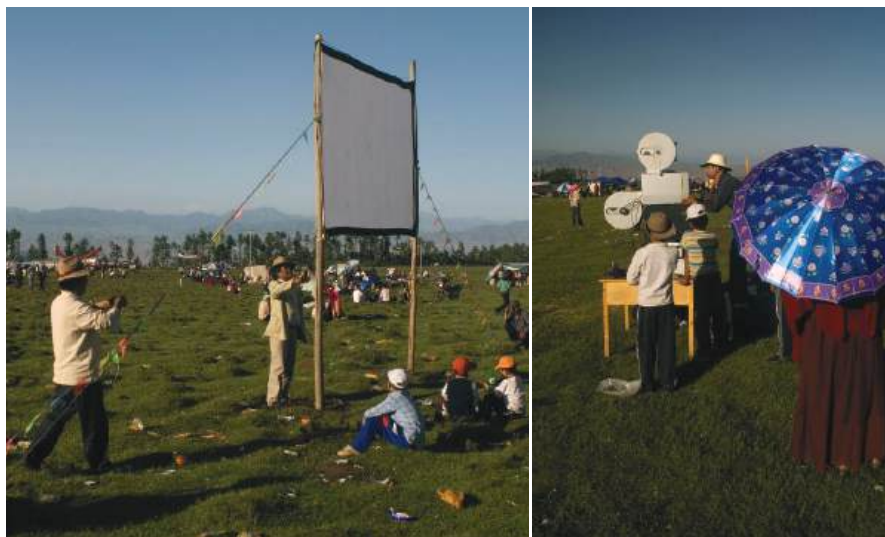
he was a man of few but carefully weighed words. Since that first encounter, we met regularly. In 2005, an international delegation of PRC filmmakers visited France for the celebration of the hundred years of Chinese cinema. He was of course the only Tibetan member. After his first feature film *The Silent Holy Stones* was shown, a French woman commented to him: “This is not real Tibet!” He smiled recalling that moment, which comforted him in his mission. As he often declared, people had been nurtured by Western-centred and Sino-centred (mis)representations of Tibet on screen and his mission was to rectify that. Moreover, his native place Amdo was still marginal at that time. Most outsiders interested in Tibetan matters had been little exposed back then to Amdo or Kham: Tibet was Lhasa or Central Tibet. So, although that French watcher’s remark was preposterous, it did touch upon a serious question for Pema: given Tibet’s vastness and variety of regional customs and languages, what type of “Tibet” was he to represent?

One year later, in July 2006, he organised a public, open-air screening of that same film, next to Kou monastery (Tib. Ko’u dgon), in Chentsa (Tib. Gcan tsha, Malho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai). *Silent Holy Stones* had been shot there, a choice partly due to Gangzhun (Tib. Gangs zhun, aka Sangye Gyatso, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, who contributes to this issue). Gangzhun, his university friend turned producer-in-the-making, was native from that area, knew the lama at the monastery, and had facilitated contacts between Pema and the monastery. We shared a car to reach the location and had time to discuss leisurely the difficulty of being a Tibetan filmmaker in the PRC. At that time, he was just embarking upon that new path, which he knew well was fraught with difficulties. He had to first build a Tibet-centred

visual identity, which meant contesting what had prevailed until then, i.e., both Western preconceptions and a thoroughly Sino-centred filmic representation of Tibet.⁵ Also, he was aware of having to tread a very fine line as a freelance Tibetan filmmaker: he was particularly watched by the authorities while also being celebrated by them. He somehow always managed to satisfy both sides through his films: the Tibetan side by making world-quality, Tibet-centred films that indicated, often between the lines, the quandaries of being a Tibetan in the PRC; and the official Chinese side, who could claim that Tibetan culture was flourishing inside the PRC, taking his films as a proof of vitality and thus contradicting gloomy descriptions of Tibet under China as a hell on earth, a description that came from exile Tibetan circles or Western pro-Tibetan ones. Pema as far as I remember was already teeming with projects and had many more films in mind.

The Silent Holy Stones being a 35mm film, we needed to climb up winding mountain paths leading to the screening area. The staff, hands full of movie reels, screening equipment, and projector borrowed from nearby Rebkong film theatre, reached a vast plain. They set up a large piece of cotton, hung between wooden poles, which served as a makeshift screen. Before dusk, more and more people gathered, seating on the grass. An ornate Tibetan tent was also erected, to receive and entertain important guests.

⁵ On China-made films about Tibet, see Barnett 2020 and Frangville 2012.



Preparation for the open-air screening of *Silent Holy Stones*, Chentsa, Summer 2006
©Gilles Sabrié

The evening was bright, warm, and clear; the atmosphere jolly and festive. The screening provided a welcome and unusual source of entertainment at a time when mobile phones, videos, films, and TV series were still a rarity in rural areas. Hundreds of people, often whole families, saw for the first time a film about their own life, in their own language on a screen. For Pema, it was a way of celebrating with that local community the feat of having succeeded in making his film. But, on a larger scale, he was giving them what he felt was long overdue: a filmic representation of their culture, from the inside, and to which they could easily relate.⁶ Some in the audience were thrilled to be

⁶ It is now well established that Pema was the first filmmaker in the PRC who insisted upon having full-fledged Tibetan characters performed by Tibetans (not a common feature in the early

represented in a rather faithful way on screen, while others could not see the point of seeing their own, uneventful life, portrayed in a film—an involuntary indication that Pema's goal had been fulfilled, that of being as close as possible to a certain Tibetan reality. He held to that mission until the end, declaring in 2021: "I hope our films could be authentic enough for Tibetan people to recognize their own everyday lives when they see it. Previous films shot in Tibet may tell stories in a Han Chinese way of thinking."⁷



A careful audience watching *Silent Holy Stones*, Chentsa, Summer 2006 ©Gilles Sabrié

2000s) and in the Tibetan language (most PRC Tibet-related films were systematically dubbed into Chinese until then).

⁷ Quoted in <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2023/05/remembering-pema-tsedon-a-giant-of-filmmaking/>

In 2008, Pema came over to France for the second time. He was hopeful that his second movie *The Search* would be shortlisted at the Cannes Film Festival. Xu Feng, a partly French-based Chinese professor of cinema (see his essay in the present issue), introduced him to the late Pierre Rissient, a producer and discoverer of Asian independent cinema in France.⁸ Pierre Rissient was very enthusiastic about *The Search* but strongly suggested that Pema cuts thirty minutes off the film, which was almost three hours long. Pema complied reluctantly—it was like “cutting the hands of one’s child,” he said. Despite this sacrifice, and much to his dismay, *The Search* failed to be selected by the Cannes. I was witness to the phone call that a furious Rissient made to the person in charge of the final selection in the Cannes Festival: he basically told him they were idiots. Pema looked quiet, but his hopes were certainly shattered inside.



Pema Tseden in 2008 ©Françoise Robin

⁸ The UNESCO “Fellini Prize”, awarded to personalities who have contributed to the cinema, was granted to him in 2002 for introducing Asian cinema to the Western world. He produced Jane Campion’s *The Piano Lesson* as well as Abbas Kiarostami’s *Taste of Cherry*.

In the summer of 2009, we had tea with his friend and director of photography Sonthar Gyal on the roof terrace of a Tibetan teahouse overlooking the Jokhang Square in Tibet's capital, Lhasa. Both Pema and Sonthar Gyal were taking part in a documentary film about Samye Monastery (Tib. Bsam yas dgon pa)—Sonthar Gyal told me later that Pema had trouble with the altitude already in Samye. We discussed at length their film tastes, and I remember thinking it was wonderful to spend time in the historic heart of Lhasa, discussing Ingmar Bergman's movies with such a distinguished and knowledgeable company, with a view to the Jokhang.

In 2011, we met again in New York, this time for the Third International Conference on the Tibetan Language, hosted and organised by the Latse Library. One afternoon, along with Dukar Tserang, the sound engineer who worked with him at the beginning before embarking upon his own film career, we prepared for the evening's talk, which both of them had been invited to give.⁹ That was necessary due to my limited command on Amdo dialect. For a reason I cannot remember, during the talk at Latse, I deviated from what we had agreed upon and dragged him towards unplanned questions. He was upset. But I now understand his reaction: he was still struggling to fulfil his difficult mission—establishing a Tibetan cinema—and he needed to master most aspects of that mission. That evening, someone asked him why his movies were slow, lacked spectacularity, and may not be that attractive to more popular audiences. He explained that Tibet was a rural

⁹ The 2011-2012 issue of Latse Journal was dedicated to Tibetan cinema: https://issuu.com/tracefoundation/docs/latse_issu/1 It includes one article by Pema Tseden about young Tibetan filmmakers, already signalling his attention to the next generation.

area, sparsely populated, and lacked cinema halls. He explained that no producers would engage funds in comedies that appealed only to the Tibetan taste. Instead, he had to develop scripts that could appeal to the Chinese as well as international audiences while being true to Tibet.

In early July 2012, thanks again to Xu Feng's efforts and good connections in the French film scene, Pema was invited to the La Rochelle Film Festival (FEMA), a well-established festival, that offers a combination of promising directors and repertoire films. Every year, a section is dedicated to the cinematography of a 'minor' or less-known national cinema. Tibet not being a country, the section was framed as an introduction to Pema's filmography. He had just finished *Old Dog*, which he showed to a packed theatre, and he also showed his early films.



Catalogue of the La Rochelle Film Festival (FEMA), 2012

The few days in La Rochelle were spent in meetings and conversations with the public, and several interviews, during one of which he declared: “I do not think cinema can save a culture, but it can

contribute to its memory.”¹⁰ It is also in La Rochelle that he shared an interesting story about his childhood. He has already recalled that early period in “Three Photographs from my Youth,” published in *Yeshe*:

[M]y paternal grandfather [...] was convinced that I was the reincarnation of his uncle. His uncle was a Tibetan Buddhist monk of the Nyingma school who owned many volumes of sutras and was rather well educated. My grandfather said that it was thanks to his uncle that he could recite some Buddhist scriptures and understood some Nyingma rituals, and he was grateful for this. Supposedly, when I was very young, I spoke about some things that had to do with his uncle, and that was why my grandfather was so sure that I was the reincarnation of his uncle.¹¹

What Pema did not write in this piece, originally published in China, but which he confided to me in La Rochelle, is that his grandfather had another ‘proof’ that unmistakably confirmed Pema as the reincarnation of his own uncle. Surprisingly for a boy from a monolingual, rural background, Pema excelled in the Chinese language. The grandfather found an explicatory Buddhist logical frame: just as his uncle had learnt smattering of Chinese because he had spent years—and died—in a Chinese labour camp,¹² so could Pema express himself at ease in the Chinese language on account of a karmic residue

¹⁰ <https://www.sudouest.fr/thematiques/archives/article9348232.ece>

¹¹ <https://yeshe.org/three-photographs-and-the-days-of-my-youth/>

¹² Many Amdo men underwent the same fate after the massive anti-Communist uprising that engulfed Amdo in 1958. For a fine historical study of that period, see Weiner 2020.

(Tib. *bag chags*) from his previous life. The great Amdo Uprising in 1958 was, and still is almost seven decades on, a topic that cannot be discussed openly in the PRC despite the immense trauma it left on a whole generation. During the festival, another instance of partial disclosure of reality occurred. One memorable evening, we had dinner with Michel Piccoli (1925-2020). Piccoli had adored *Old Dog* and asked technicalities about the particularly gripping and tragic last scene: how had he filmed it? With what camera? Piccoli's enthusiasm was quite a compliment, coming from a famous French actor who had played under such illustrious directors as J.L. Godard, F. Truffaut, and L. Bunuel to name just a few. Pema, after answering Piccoli's question, revealed that the censorship authorities had not approved the tragic ending. Despair was not allowed. But Pema had found a smart way to circumvent that order and satisfy the authorities as well as his own artistic imperatives. A few years later, Pema confided the complexity of finding topics that were both meaningful for him and that accorded with the imperatives of the censorship bureaus, as they would always scrutinise every film project in the PRC, especially when emanating from 'minorities' with a reputation of being unruly. He said:

Tibet is filled with brilliant stories. In the beginning, you don't know whether it's a historical film, a fairy tale, a realistic story because Tibet is just full of excellent stories. It's a real reservoir. But not everything is allowed. When you are involved in cinema, you realise that little by little. At first, you think, "there, that's no problem." You can pick your script like that. It's easy. But then problems arise.¹³

¹³ <https://yeshe.org/pema-tseden-the-master/>



Pema Tsenden in La Rochelle, July 2012 ©Pascal Couillaud

Our paths kept crossing, in yet another place. In August 2014, he presented his film *Sacred Arrow*, at the Beijing Sports Film Festival. Pema always harboured mixed feelings about his fourth feature film, although it was a favourite among many Tibetans. It had been commissioned by authorities in Chentsa, where he had shot *Silent Holy Stones*. They hoped to boost tourism by introducing highlights of the area to a wide public: stunning scenery, archery competition, as well as Dorje Drak Monastery (Tib: Rdo rje brag),¹⁴ reputed as a site that holds the bow having pertained to the regicide Lhalung Pelgyi Dorje (Tib. Lha lung dpal gyi rdo rje, 9th c.).¹⁵ This time, compromise was not demanded by the whims of censorship but was necessary to fulfil the sponsors' hopes for a popular movie. They did not intervene in the script.

¹⁴ Not to be confused with its synonym on the Tsangpo River, in Central Tibet, where the "Northern Treasures" Nyingma tradition flourished.

¹⁵ Lhalung is the monk who in 842 CE killed Langdarma, the supposedly anti-Buddhist Tibetan emperor, and then escaped all the way to Amdo.

Until *Balloon* (2019), and even for *Snow Leopard* (2024), finding enough capital to make films was a challenge for Pema. Having a sponsor for *Sacred Arrow* was a welcome respite. This movie stands aside in his filmography for lacking his high aesthetic standard and above all the open ending that characterises his otherwise more complex films. In fact, he seldom mentioned this film in his cinematography. But it deserves attention for two reasons: it is often mentioned as a favourite among Tibetan audiences (it can be considered a ‘popular movie’), and it was the first film in which Pema succeeded in bringing together actors from Amdo, Kham and Utsang, the three traditional regions of Tibet. This was his way of pushing the limits and encompassing all areas of Tibet in his filmography: being an Amdo Tibetan director filming in Amdo with Amdo characters was fine, but being able to bring Tibetans from all regions, despite dialectal and logistical obstacles, was another dream of his, which he fulfilled. *Sacred Arrow*’s screening in Beijing was a success: Beijing-based Tibetan intellectuals such as the Gesar epic specialist Jampel Gyatso (Tib. ’Jam dpal rgya mtsho) or the writer Rangdra (Tib. Rang sgra), as well Sonthar Gyal were among the audience, and shared their feelings in the Q&A session that followed. A Han Chinese lady, marvelling at Pema Tseden’s talent as a filmmaker (his fame was still limited then) and at the richness of Tibetan traditions that he had managed to convey in his film, compared favourably Pema’s film with Uyghur films. In the evening, with a handful of friends, we had dinner at Makye Ama, a hype Tibetan restaurant in Beijing. Pema’s son Jigme Trinley (b. 1997) joined us. It was my first encounter with Pema’s only child, who was soon to follow in his father’s steps. Jigme had been brought up in Beijing: his mother, Yudrontso, worked as a medical practitioner, and his father was busy establishing his cinematographic career in the

capital city. Jigme had thus been educated in a Chinese-language schools, while speaking Tibetan at home. Back then and still now, Beijing offers no provision even for a bilingual Tibetan-Chinese education.¹⁶ Tibetans living in Beijing, sometimes highly educated in the Tibetan language and learned in Tibetan civilisation, as they work for research institutes or publishing houses, are left finding solutions to enable their children access to some tuition in Tibetan (private courses, holidays back in the “phayul,” i.e. at the grandparents’, etc.). This is why Pema and Yudrontso sent Jigme in 2013 for one year to the “Jigmed Gyaltsan Welfare School,” a famous Tibetan private vocational high school in Amdo located in Golok (Tib. Mgo log), whose success lies in “combining the traditional and the modern in the education systems in Tibet. This approach effectively incorporates the essence of Tibetan traditional culture and has absorbed the essentials of the modern science curriculum.”¹⁷ They may have been among the first Chinese-city-dwelling Tibetan intellectuals who had taken up that step—and may have set a trend, as more and more Tibetan parents, worried by the lack of anchoring in Tibetan culture of their children brought in a pure Chinese and Sinophone education system, made a similar decision in later years. Skipping out of the Chinese curriculum system was not devoid of consequences for Jigme since he would have to double one class when back in Beijing. That type of calculation is brave in the context of the hyper competitive Chinese school system and is a good indication of the priorities of Jigme’s parents: sacrificing

¹⁶ More generally, no Tibetan-language primary and secondary language education is available in regional capitals outside the TAR, despite substantial Tibetan populations living in towns like Xining, Lanzhou, Chengdu, and repeated requests. Lhashem Gyal the Tibetan writer, and friend of Pema Tsenden, has written an essay about the quandary of Tibetans living in Beijing (Lhashamgyal no date of publication)

¹⁷ Rouzhuo 2024: 368.

one year in the highly competitive education system to ensure their son's rootedness in his ancestral culture and language, rather than uprooted social mobility. Young Jigme was thus back from Golok, with a vastly improved Tibetan fluency, after almost one year of full immersion into a nomadic, remote, Tibetophone environment over two thousand kilometers away from Beijing. He was interviewed that afternoon by the Tibetan-language channel of Qinghai Radio on the topic of his experience. His father was proud. Since then, Jigme has maintained his level of spoken Tibetan. Pema's wish was for him to receive higher education for one year in Tibetan literature at Lanzhou Northwest Nationalities Institute. Unfortunately, the Tibetan language was scrapped recently from that top university which had nurtured so many intellectuals we know today, including Pema Tsenden.¹⁸ Jigme could still register at the National Minzu Institute in Beijing, but Tibetan taught and spoken there is mainly Lhasa or "common" Tibetan, which Jigme does not master.



Sonthar Gyal (left) and Pema Tsenden (right), Makye Ama Tibetan Restaurant, Beijing, August 2014 ©Françoise Robin

¹⁸ The wave of de-ethnicization of "ethnic" higher institutes of education has gone unnoticed in the West but has been confirmed by at least three different reliable sources. This reflects "accelerated assimilationist trends [...] emphasising a Han-centred definition of the Chinese nation" (Frangville 2020: 350) since the 2000s and, increasingly so, since Xi Jinping's access to power in 2012.

It is now a commonly established fact that 2015 was a turning point in Pema Tsenden’s career: *Tharlo* was shown in the Venice film festival [as all his subsequent films: *Jinpa* (2018), *Balloon* (2019), and (*Snow Leopard*) 2023]. His initial vision, that of forging a quality Tibetan film scene, had paid off: his films had gained international visibility and recognition.



“Yangshik Tso and Pema Tsenden in Venice for the world premiere of *Tharlo*”
©Anne-Sophie Lehec

He was widely acclaimed among Tibetans as the first Tibetan ever to be shortlisted at the prestigious film festival. It is hard to imagine the pride felt by a community downtrodden in the PRC as backward and in need of patronising support and development.¹⁹ The

¹⁹ On the “gift of development” imposed by the Chinese authorities to Tibetans, as well as the trope of backwardness that often accompanies it, see Yeh 2013.

aesthetic, radical aesthetic choice that characterised *Tharlo* (austere black and white, slow takes, limited dialogues with recitations of Mao Zedong's speech at the beginning and the end), may have puzzled some Tibetan audience but pleased the international audience.²⁰ Briefly, Tharlo tells of a simple sheep herder, brought up in revolutionary times, with a pure heart, who is required like all citizens of the PRC to have his ID made. Although he fails to see the point of obtaining such a document, he goes to town to start the procedure. There, he meets a hairdresser. Without spoiling the plot, suffice to say that Tharlo faces problems with having his ID; it never materialises. But someone anonymously circulated the ID (see figure below) on social media, with the date of birth corresponding to the date of the release of the film.



Name: Tharlo

Gender: Male

Ethnicity: Tibetan

Date of birth: 2016/12/9

Residence: Many provinces, many towns, many cinemas (source: WeChat)

²⁰ J. Yeung's monography about *Tharlo* provides an excellent introduction and filmic analysis of the film, co-written with Wai-ping Yau.

Pema Tseden had gone a long way from his beginning, naturalistic, quasi-ethnographic years, and his artistic vision had come to full bloom. In 2017, I interviewed Pema on the reception of *Tharlo* among Tibetans and Chinese:

At the end of 2016, *Tharlo* was shown in China, Xining, and Tibetan towns such as Labrang, where there was a cinema. I travelled to accompany the screenings. After a week, the film was distributed in Chinese cinemas in Beijing and Shanghai. It benefitted from a real distribution in many cinemas in China. This is perhaps the first time that a film in Tibetan has been distributed for real, commercially, in China. The film has therefore given rise to a fair number of critical reviews. There have been several interpretations: Chinese film buffs and film specialists have generally been very appreciative, understanding that the film is not just about Tibet or Tibetans. Some Chinese said that they too, in the countryside, were familiar with the phenomenon depicted in *Tharlo*: "It's happened to us too, or it's happening to us. This situation exists now. We have similar situations", they said. Among Tibetans, several opinions circulated: some said that the film did a good job of showing the changes in the lives of Tibetans, or that it did a good job of representing Tibetans. Then others said that the film was not good, that it was not right to show Tibetans in this light. Some Tibetans said that the film was a love film, others that it showed loneliness. Still others said it showed the human condition. Reactions were very diverse, particularly among Tibetans. Whatever the

case, the film remained on screen in Xining for 1 month. [Tibetan] people came from all over the place where we hadn't been able to show the film, from small villages, monasteries, etc., which didn't have cinemas. Some didn't even know how to buy cinema tickets (laughs). And everyone understood the film in their own way... In Chinese cinemas, the film sold one million tickets. That's not much in China, but it's a lot for a Tibetan film. *Tharlo* was selected by around thirty international festivals. But I was not able to attend all of them. It won fifteen to twenty awards. At the Taipei Golden Horse Festival in Taiwan, it won several awards (screenplay, direction, photography, etc.). This certainly enabled the film to be released on Chinese screens. It went to Venice and even though it didn't win any prizes there, that also helped to get the film released on Chinese screens. It was shown in arthouse cinemas in China, but not in the commercial cinema networks. Finally, several cafés in Tibet are now called "Café Tharlo".

That same year, Lhapal Gyal (Tib. Lha dpal rgyal), Pema's 'spiritual son' in cinema, was shooting his debut feature film *Wangdrak's Rain Boots* with Pema as the executive producer. With Chime-la (Professor Hoshi Izumi), a seasoned translator of contemporary Tibetan literature from Tokyo University, we asked Pema if we could join the team, to which he agreed.



Pema Tseden in Chumar (Tib. Chu dmar), his son Jigme behind him, August 2017
©Françoise Robin

A driver fetched us in Xining and took us to the school which had been turned into the headquarters of the film in Chumar (Tib. Chu dmar, Hualong District, Qinghai). Two bunk beds had been arranged for us in the women's dorm.



The dorm for women and children staff hired on *Wangdrak's Rain Boots*, August 2017
©Françoise Robin



The classroom turned into a women's dorm, make up and costumes room,
August 2017 ©Françoise Robin



Pema Tsenden and Lhapal Gyal, on the shooting of *Wangdrak's Rain Boots*,
August 2017 ©Françoise Robin

In the few days spent there, we realised how Pema's presence mattered: he would give advice, make suggestions, offer solutions. Lhapal Gyal told me that with Pema around, actors and staff were more focused and obedient.



Morning session: Pema Tsenden gives instructions to the film staff in the courtyard of the school rented as a base, to host the film crew, August 2017 ©Françoise Robin



Pema sharing thoughts and giving instructions to his crew, in a family courtyard used for one of the scenes, August 2017 ©Françoise Robin

It was during a car trip at that time that Pema confided to me how much he still resented not having been selected for the Cannes Film Festival back in 2008. If only festival organisers in the world could understand that being able to set a Tibetan cinema was almost miraculous, that behind the level of professionalism on the screen was

a constant bricolage and manoeuvring between money, technology, and politics, maybe they would have considered Pema's films a little differently. After a few days, Chime-la and I returned to Xining. Pema had arranged for a car to drive us back, and to our surprise had even booked a hotel and a meal at a vegetarian restaurant in Xining. That was one of his other many qualities: he was always considerate to others.

Pema Tsenden would usually choose winter to shoot his films since, as he told me once, colours on the Tibetan plateau were so bright in the summer that film watchers, engrossed with the spectacular sceneries, may be distracted from the plot or characters. But in 2018, when I reached Xining again, Pema was about to shoot his next film and he agreed to my request to spend a few days on location. He sent Akang, his cousin-cum-driver-cum-facilitator, to fetch me at the bus station in Thrika (Ch. Guide). From there, Akang went to buy medicine for Pema, who was already suffering from diabetes, and then took us to Pema Tsenden's home village in Dzona (Tib. Mdzo sna), not far from the Yellow River. The shooting of *Balloon* was to start within a few days, so I was first taken to Pema's headquarters, a small official and disused compound that he had acquired. Ever since Jigme, now a young adult, had enrolled at the Beijing Film Academy and required less parental supervision, Pema and his wife Yudrontso had returned to Xining, true to Pema's initial commitment to establish a cinema environment in Tibetan areas.²¹

²¹ At almost the same time, Sonthar Gyal had also established "Garuda" (Tib. Khyung), a cinema base in his hometown, Bardzong (Tib. 'Ba' rdzong, Gad pa sum rdo District, Qinghai). For details, see Robin 2017 (<https://highpeakspureearth.com/poem-this-is-how-we-quietly-work-by-byangshun-with-accompanying-essay-by-francoise-robin/>). According to Sonthar Gyal, in 2023, it had become a fully-equipped studio and training centre (for sound engineer, light, photography,



Courtyard of Pema's headquarters in Dzong, July 2018 ©Flora Lichaa

The small compound had dorms for the team, along with a common kitchen in which Pema's aunt operated as a cook with a smiling authority.

make-up, editing, props, color grading). It was holding training sessions with professional instructors coming over from Eastern China, and young trainees being sent for further study in mainland China. Sixty persons had registered officially as film-related staff in Bardzong, which represented the highest proportion in the whole of Qinghai (personal communication, July 2023, Xining).



Pema's aunt preparing lunch, August 2018 ©Françoise Robin

Meals were served in the courtyard on long tables. Pema's office and bedroom were on the second floor.



Front view of Pema's headquarters in Dzong July 2018 ©Flora Lichaa

This apparently banal place was in fact full of surprise. During my first lunch there, I heard "O Sole Mio" played at full blast. It was rather unusual to hear this music in Tibet—rather, one hears popular Tibetan songs most of the time. I soon learned that it was the main song of *Jinpa* (where the song is heard both in Neapolitan and Tibetan, as Pema commissioned a translation of the lyrics; it is interpreted by one of the only Tibetan tenors with an international career, named Dorje Tsering²²). The team was in a jolly mood, celebrating the recently received news that the film had been shortlisted in the Orizzonti program at the 75th Venice Film Festival (he was to receive a prize for the best screenplay). The truck used in *Jinpa*'s shooting was also there, in the front courtyard.



Jinpa's truck, July 2018 ©Flora Lichaa

²² On whom see http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/eyesoftibetan/2015-07/14/content_21709840.htm

I was also surprised by the opportunity to meet Takbum Gyal (Tib. *Stag 'bum rgyal*) in these headquarters. He is a celebrated writer whom Pema Tseden had translated into Chinese (see P. Schiaffini-Vedani's article in this issue). Takbum Gyal was revising the script with Pema.

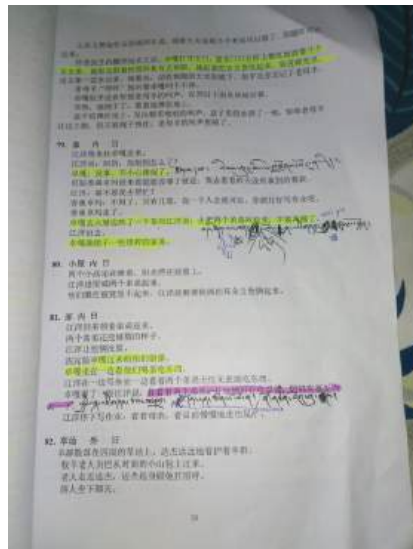


Takbumgyal (left), Pema Tseten (center, seated), Rabten (center, standing), Kunde (right), Dzong, ©Françoise Robin, August 2018

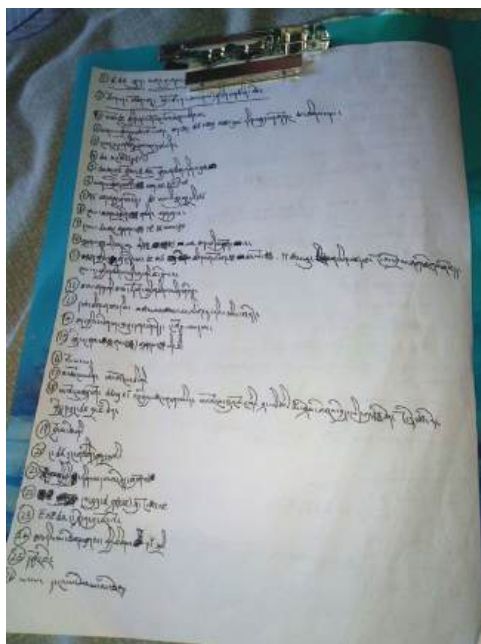
Jinpa, Pema's iconic actor, was also present, rehearsing his part along with Sonam Wangmo (Tib. *Bsod nams dbang mo*), who had played the part of the flirtatious tavern owner in *Jinpa*. In idle moments, he played the flute or joked with the crew, lending a hand when needed. Sonam Wangmo, an elegant actress and dancer from Lhasa, was now to perform the part of an Amdo peasant. She did not master Amdo Tibetan. Pema had appointed two Amdo language trainers, who were from the area where the plot of the film was to take place.



Sonam Wangmo (right) transcribing her lines from the Chinese script into Amdo Tibetan with the help of actor Jinpa (left), and language instructor and staff Loden (middle) ©Françoise Robin, August 2018



Original script of *Balloon* in Chinese language annotated in Tibetan by Sonam Wangmo ©Françoise Robin, August 2018



Transcription by Sonam Wangmo of her lines for *Balloon* ©Françoise Robin, August 2018

The biggest surprise was yet to come. Loden, one of two language instructors of Sonam Wangmo, himself a budding young filmmaker (see Brigitte Duzan's article in this issue), asked me if I wanted to go with him to fetch some meat from a freezer located in one the rooms of the compounds. He opened the door, and we entered... the photo studio of *Tharlo*.



Loden in Dzong showing the props of the photo studio in *Tharlo*
©Françoise Robin, August 2018.

Then Loden led me with a smile to another room on the ground floor, next to Jinpa's truck: we entered the hairdresser salon, which plays a big part in *Tharlo*.



Writer Takbum Gyal showing the props of the hairdresser salon used in *Tharlo*
©Françoise Robin, August 2018



A still of the hairdresser's room from *Tharlo*

Next to Pema's private quarters, on the second floor, was the "police station" of *Tharlo*. Big Chinese letters "Serving the people" could still be read on the wall. There was now a ping-pong table in the middle of the room. I realized that most of the interior scenes from *Tharlo* were created from scratch in this small compound, Pema's makeshift cinema studio.



The recreated police station, in Pema Tseden's headquarters, Dzong

After a few days of rehearsals and preparations, the team moved 200 kilometres north to the shores of the Kokonor Lake in Dabzhi (Tib. Mda' bzhi) to start the shooting. Spending three days with the team enabled me to witness the hyperactivity that characterises such unique moments of crystallization of projects after months of intense preparation. The overall mood was concentrated and relaxed at the same time. Everyone was crammed in bunk beds, in an atmosphere not unlike that of summer camps. Pema had a room for himself, trying to preserve and maintain some serenity and concentration, conducive to good work. He was addressed by his team as "Gen-la" (professor, teacher). They worked hard but with a joyful and friendly atmosphere, with little tension despite the intense schedule. Almost two decades of dedication and inspiration

had yielded good results. Back in the early 2000s, Pema had dreamt of a Tibetan cinema that could stand on its feet. Talent, efficiency, commitment as well as a team spirit had borne fruit.

2019 was the last year we were to meet, and fortunately, we had three opportunities to do so. He came over to France with his wife and son. He received for *Jinpa* the Golden Cycle, the most prestigious award at the Vesoul FICA Asian Film Festival. He happily mixed with French admirers and friends at our university, Inalco, where he was a regular visitor.



Pema Tsenden (front, right) signing autographs after the screening of “*Silent Holy Stones*”, Inalco ©Françoise Robin, February 2019



Pema Tsenden presenting *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005) at Inalco, Paris, February 2019.



The Pema family in the Paris underground. ©Françoise Robin, February 2019

Pema took advantage of that trip to Paris to visit the Cannes Film Festival Paris office, where he had secured a meeting with Christian Jeune, vice-head of the Cannes Film Festival. In the waiting room, Pema confided that he knew his films stood little chance: no terrorism, no violence, no sex, no migration. Christian Jeune welcomed Pema and his family, with a big smile on his face, on the top floor of the building. Although Pema's films had never been selected at the Cannes Film Festival, he had become an indispensable member of the great world cinema family.



Pema's family and Christian Jeune (2nd right), vice-head, Cannes Film Festival headquarters, Paris ©Françoise Robin, February 2019

In July, Pema and I met again, this time on the occasion of the 15th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, held in Paris. Although not a scholar in Tibetan Studies, he was our guest

speaker. He accepted our invitation despite his busy schedule—a sign that Tibetan Studies mattered to him. Due to technical problems, we had to show *Old Dog* instead of *Jinpa*—a choice that he did not approve of, given the tragic ending of *Old Dog* always created a steer among the public. Before the screening, he delivered a speech about the importance of maintaining a high standard in Tibetan Studies. He had many university friends in that field and could interact with scholars at ease, always keen to learn new things and deepen his knowledge. His calm demeanour and determination struck many in the audience, who met him for the first time.



Pema (right) and his translator (author of this essay, left), during the plenary session of the 15th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies. July 2019, Paris ©Olivier Adam

The cruise organised on River Seine provided to him a rare moment of respite.

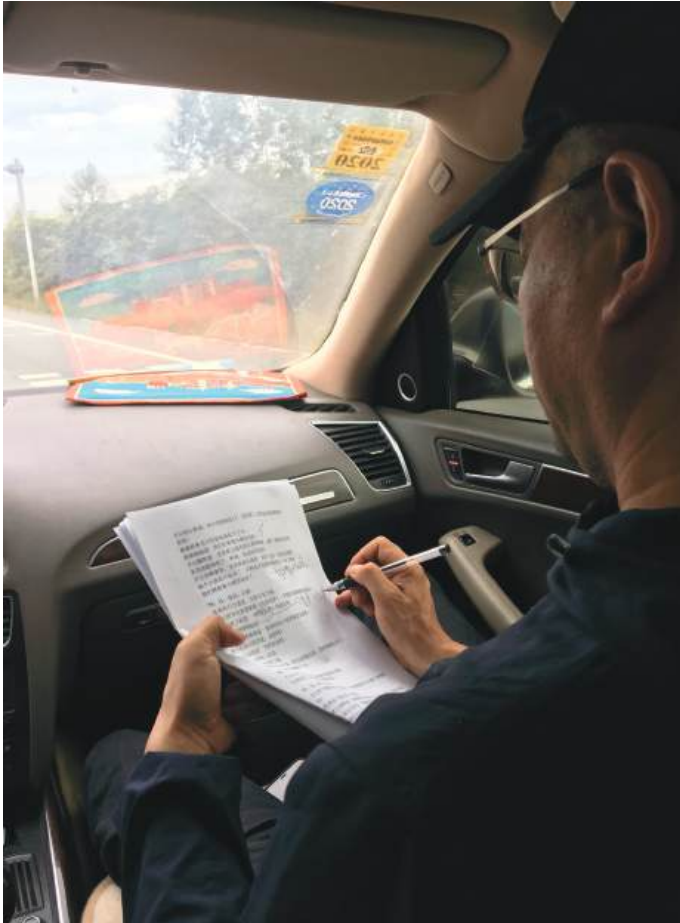


During a cruise on the river Seine, 15th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies. July 2019, Paris ©Olivier Adam



During a cruise on the river Seine, 15th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies. July 2019, Paris ©Françoise Robin

In August of that year, Lhapal Gyal (director of *Wangdrak's Rain Boots*) was shooting *The Great Distance Delivers Crane* (it was to be released in 2021). Pema, who was the executive producer, shared his car with me from Xining to the shooting location. He worked for most of the car ride.



Pema annotating a scenario, on the way between Xining and Dabzhi
©Françoise Robin, August 2019

As on *Wangdrak's Rain Boots* shooting, the mood was active, relaxed, and dedicated. The team comprised of, quite stable from one year to the other, a group of young Tibetan-Chinese and Tibetan (mostly) men, all eager to contribute to the emergence of a Tibetan cinema, and several of Pema's relatives and old friends, equally keen to give a hand.



Pema Tsenden, discussing with the staff of Lhapal Gyal's second film, *The Great Distance Delivers Crane* ©Françoise Robin, August 2019

We met again one last time in Venice that year, where he was with Jigme Trinley and received an award for *Balloon*.



Pema Tsenden (2nd right), Jigme Trinley (2nd left), a producer from "The Factory" (right), the author (left) ©Françoise Robin, September 2019

That was the last time we were to meet. He was due to come to France again to preside over the jury of the Vesoul FICA Asian Film Festival in March 2020 but was unable to attend due to the pandemic. During the three years that followed, communication and circulation were difficult between the PRC and the rest of the world.

On 7 May 2023, I joined for an afternoon tea a friend in a Tibetan restaurant in Paris. I slightly erred on my way there and found myself almost in front of the building where I had seen a furious Pierre Rissient, back in 2008, yelling at the then head of the Cannes Film Festival upon learning that Pema's *The Search* rejection. I finally made it to the restaurant, intensely thinking of Pema. In the evening, I went to see Howard Hawk's *The Big Sleep*, shown at the prestigious French Cinematheque, in the same room as Pema's *Old Dog* had been shown

back in 2017 during a retrospective dedicated to “News Voices of the Young Chinese Cinema.” At 7:54 pm I took a snapshot of one of the first images of the film, intending to send it to Pema the next day, as a gentle way to say hello. Almost at the same time, he was collapsing on his knees, somewhere in Nakartse, a small Tibetan town. Little did I know that he had entered into his own big sleep...



Snapshot at French Cinémathèque, May 7, 2023, 7.54pm ©Françoise Robin

The next morning, at around 10:00 am in France, the unbelievable news of his passing reached us. As the People’s Republic of China had opened again to tourism recently, I made a point of returning to Xining and to ask Pema Tseden’s friends what had really happened. Since May 8, rumours were abuzz, but more than rumours, there was silence. Communication is not easy between the PRC and the rest of the world, and it was also too painful a topic to broach over WeChat. Many emails and messages of condolence from friends in France, Europe, and the world had reached my email box, and I wanted to know from first-hand witnesses what had happened to

someone only 53 years of age (54 in Tibetan years) and at the apex of his magnificent career. I arrived in Xining in late July 2023. Tsemdo, Pema Tseden's faithful assistant, agreed to share with me details about what had happened even though it was still painful for him to revive those moments. We met in Pema's office, Mani Stones Pictures, in the hype western quarter of Xining, the newly developed and hype area where things happen. Tsemdo is now the legal representative of Mani Stones Pictures.



Room with a view: view from Pema Tseden's office, Xining ©Françoise Robin, August 2023

Pema's room, his tea set untouched, his projects, everything was in neat order. Posters of Pema's films, some awards, Pema's films DVD copies and books—a testimony to his busy life—was being stored and archived.



Tsemdo, in Mani Stone Pictures office, Xining ©Françoise Robin, August 2023

Tsemdo took me to a Tibetan restaurant nearby (where a sign said “It is very good to know many languages, but shameful not to know yours”), and we sat for a good two or three hours. He had been with Pema until his last breath and is a trustworthy witness. I will summarise here our conversation, which he allowed me to share, complementing the already detailed information provided in Dhondup T. Rekjong’s biography.²³

In December 2022, the PRC government yielded to internal pressure and abruptly eased its harsh anti-COVID measures, mainly strict lockdown. Like many others in the PRC, Pema, who suffered from chronic diabetes and hypertension, caught Covid rather badly. He recovered, but his lung and respiratory functions were possibly undermined, one of

²³ <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Pema-Tsedon/13816>

the usual aftermaths of COVID-19. For Tibetan New Year, Pema, his wife Yudontso, and their son Jigme, as well as a few Tibetan friends, visited Pema's mother, an elderly sick woman, in Dzong. Pema then returned to Hangzhou, where he held a position for three years as a professor at the School of Film Art, China Academy of Art (CAA).²⁴ Hangzhou, on the eastern coast of China, lies at a very low altitude. In April 2024, Jigme Trinley began shooting *Karma and the Path* (Tib. *Las dang lam*), his second film after *One and Four* (Tib. *Gcig dang Bzhi*, 2021), this time in the Tibet Autonomous Region. It was a road movie, taking place in the Tibet Autonomous Region, in locations far apart (Lhasa, Shigatse, Everest Base camp) and with a substantial crew (over one hundred and twenty people). As was customary, Jigme and his father collaborated, and Pema planned to visit his son and the crew at the site of the shooting. On May 1, Pema flew from Hangzhou to Lhasa. Instead of resting for a few days to get accustomed to high altitude, as most travellers do, Pema, the ever-busy person, immediately drove to Nakartse, a small town by the Yamdrok Yumtso lake (Tib. *Yar 'brog g.yu mtsho*) at an altitude of 5,200m. Life on a shooting site is extremely busy and people were working tirelessly. Pema, when not on location, worked from his hotel room, revising a script, answering emails, evaluating projects, helping students, reading, etc. Normally, an assistant took care of Pema's basic needs (food, health, sleeping arrangement), as

²⁴ For a tribute to Pema Tsenden emanating from the school, see <https://en.caa.edu.cn/news/1032.html>

Pema would tend to neglect these material aspects of life when he was busy on a shooting. Unfortunately, during these last few days, he was by himself. On May 6, Pema went to the Yardrok Yumtso Lake to accompany Jigme, who was directing a few scenes there. At 9:00 pm on May 7, Damchö (Tib. *Dam chos*), one of the actors in Jigme's film, asked Tsemdo if Pema could have dinner with him, but Pema had already had dinner and was busy working on a new script. He was fine at that point in time and had taken a walk with one of the Chinese technicians of the crew. On May 8 at 3:00 am, Pema asked Tsemdo to take him to the hospital, as he was feeling unwell. Tsemdo immediately arranged for a car to wait for them at the entrance of the hotel. In the meantime, Pema left a second message to Tsemdo, asking him to bring him oxygen; altitude sickness is common at such an altitude and the crew had kept some in case of need. Tsemdo grabbed two bottles of oxygen downstairs and rushed up to Pema's room. He saw that the bottle that was already in Pema's room was empty. He gave oxygen to Pema who, at that point, could talk and walk. Tsemdo helped him downstairs, they entered the car waiting for them and reached the dispensary in a matter of minutes. Upon arrival, although Tsemdo had phoned ahead to request a doctor to be ready, no one was at the gate. Pema got out of the car by himself although he was weak and quiet. He vomited and collapsed. It was a little past 3:30 am, and at that point, Jigme, who was staying at a different hotel, had reached the hospital. The doctor finally opened the hospital door and tried to revive Pema for forty minutes but to no avail. Tsemdo and Jigme

tried to have Pema flown by helicopter to Lhasa, but none would take off before dawn. An ambulance with Pema, Jigme, and Pema Dorje (Tib. Padma rdo rje), Pema's relative who was working on the film, rushed to Lhasa, over 175 km from Nakartse, and Tsemdo, Jinpa and others followed in their cars. They reached the Lhasa People's Hospital, but Pema was declared dead by the Lhasa doctors at 7:57 am. The consensus is that he suffered from chronic ailments (diabetes, hypertension), had overworked himself over the last two decades, had reached Nakartse too quickly, coming from Hanzhou which is at sea level, had suffered from a lack of oxygen, and after-effects from Covid affected his lung functions. His body was brought to a friend's home in Lhasa. Incredulous and devastated friends and relatives phoned one another, and many flew to Lhasa to pay him a last visit. On May 10, his body was driven three times around the Jokhang, the holiest of the holiest in the Tibetan world. Then Pema was cremated, and his ashes were brought back to his home village.



A screenshot of a picture of family, friends, and colleagues, gathered in Pema's hometown on May 13th (Source: WeChat)

There Tsemdo ended his recollection and summarized: “When he was with us, we never worried. We knew we could call him. This is over.” Other friends, whom I also met last summer in Amdo, told me that when friends and family gathered on the 49th day of Pema’s passing, authorities warned them not to come in numbers and not to share much content on social media. As one friend lamented: “We were his closest friends. Others in Beijing, Chengdu, and elsewhere, all were allowed to gather at their will.”



On the 49th day of Pema’s passing, at Ko’u Monastery (Chentsa), where he had filmed *Silent Holy Stones* (2005) (Source: WeChat)

Like Pema Tseden’s numerous friends, I still find it hard to believe that he is not among us anymore. In a way, the way he left us, so suddenly, echoes the ending of his short stories and films: an open ending, leaving the audience full of questions, and busy elaborating on how to interpret the narrative. An abrupt, undecided ending. What made him leave so quickly, as if in haste? Did he overwork himself? Did he

make room for the next generation? What will be his legacy? Will the new generation, which he has fostered, keep the flame and make films? He was optimistic when he said in August 2018 in Xining:

There aren't many professional Tibetan films yet, but I'm optimistic. We have no economic base, but despite everything, we've been able to make several professional films that have been judged good enough to find their place in international cinema, in festivals, and that's very satisfying. We can now tell Tibetan stories at festivals, on the same level as other films.

To be in the same category as other films, from an artistic point of view, even if there aren't many of us, is a huge source of satisfaction. All it takes is a handful of these professional Tibetan films. In China, a thousand films are made every year, but that's not many compared to the total population. Moreover, few of these films find their way onto the screen. Finally, very few of these films are arthouse films, and the number of arthouse films in China is declining. That Tibetan films can be at par with Chinese films in terms of professionalism is a source of satisfaction.

In September 2023, Jigme, Jinpa, and Tseten Tashi came to Venice for the world premiere of *Snow Leopard*. The team had not recovered their luggage and had to buy suits in Venice at the last minute. The film was very well received among the audience, many of whom were not aware of the tragic passing away of Pema Tseden a few months before. The team was dignified and very moved. Under

our friend Mara Matta's guidance and flair, we took a harassed team to a secluded restaurant with a nice courtyard under the shade of trees, in the Jewish Ghetto. We ordered plates of meat and beer—except for Tseten Tashi, who is a vegetarian. The team could at last relax. Jigme struck me as being as strong as a rock. I asked him how he was coping. He said, “Fine. Sometimes I dream of my father. He tells me—Don't worry. Everything will be alright.”



Father and son, Paris underground ©Françoise Robin, February 2019.

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“While he was alive, we never worried”: Tseten Tashi on Working with Pema Tseden on *Snow Leopard*

Tseten Tashi

(Transcribed by Tsering Wangdue and translated from Tibetan by
Françoise Robin)

Abstract: Tseten Tashi plays the monk in *Snow Leopard*, Pema Tseden’s penultimate film. He visited Paris in February 2024 upon the invitation of the 30th Asian Cinema International Film Festival (FICA), held in Vesoul (Eastern France). Before heading back home, Tseten Tashi was invited by the Tibetan Studies department at Inalco (Paris) for an encounter with Tibetan film fans, members of the local Tibetan community, and Tibetan language students. For two hours on 14 February, he described in Tibetan language his own debuts as an actor and remembered fondly the unique and first-hand experience of having worked under Pema Tseden’s benevolent and professional guidance. He then answered the audience’s questions ranging from the Tibetan people’s relationship to snow leopards to the real monk behind the character played by Tseten Tashi and the fake sheep in the film, from vegetarianism to the problems of shooting films in various Tibetan dialects. He also described in detail the extreme hardships he inflicted upon himself to provide the best performance he could. The exchange ended in an emotional mood, as Tseten Tashi was requested to comment about the future of Tibetan cinema after Pema Tseden’s

untimely demise. Throughout his speech and in his exchange with the audience, in accordance with the Tibetan custom consisting in avoiding mentioning by name a deceased person, Tseten Tashi refers to the director of *Snow Leopard* by his honorary title, ‘Gen-la,’ which can be translated as ‘Sir,’ or ‘Teacher’. The translator has opted for leaving it as it is. His speech and the Q&A are slightly edited for clarity.

Keywords: Pema Tseden, film, acting, Tibet, snow leopard



Still from *Snow Leopard* (2023), with Tseten Tashi (courtesy of TIFF)

My Experience as an Actor in Snow Leopard

(Tseten Tashi’s talk at Inalco)

My name is Tseten Tashi. I am from Nangchen in Kham. I have never studied cinema, but before I played in a movie, I went to work for a year in a Chinese film company. Among my colleagues at the time

was a Chinese film actor named Dang Haoyu.²⁵ He was a Buddhist. He once stayed in a retreat in my hometown. He had performed the 400,000 preliminary practices²⁶ and had already gone all the way to Lhasa by prostrating.

That person had a Chinese school friend who was the producer of Gen-la's movie *Balloon*. That school friend introduced him to Gen-la because he had gone to make a pilgrimage to Lhasa. When Gen-la found out that he was going to make a pilgrimage again, this time from my hometown of Nangchen to Lhasa, he felt like making a documentary about it. Why? Even for us Tibetans, it is difficult to make a pilgrimage to Lhasa. But it is even less easy for a Chinese to make a pilgrimage of twelve hundred miles over four months. In addition, Gen-la's son, Jigme Trinle, was yet to make a documentary. Gen-la thought it would be very auspicious for his son to take this pilgrimage as the topic for his first documentary. He instructed his son to work hard for four months to make a film on the said topic.

When the Chinese actor declared to me, "You will come to do the prostrations with me," at first, I thought I would not be able to do the prostrations all the way to Lhasa. I had lost weight then; so I was a little weak. I said I would certainly not be able to make it, and also, I

²⁵ See <https://www.chinaindiefilm.org/meet-the-filmmakers-2/> for some details about Dang Haoyu (all footnotes are by the translator).

²⁶ Preliminary practices refers to a set of religious actions that a Buddhist practitioner must accomplish when entering the Vajrayana path. It often consists in reflecting about the nature of life and the necessity to engage in the practice, and then in the accumulation of hundreds of thousands of prostrations, mental purification, offerings and spiritual union with one's lama. Its aim is to purify the person's mind and develop the prerequisite qualities for the main tantric practices.

feared that if I felt a little unwell on the way, that would cause trouble to all the film crew. So I refused and said I would instead stay in my homeland for about four months to accumulate the preliminaries while he would do the prostrations. At that time, there was a hermit in our homeland who had been in retreat for eleven years. When I went to ask him for the instructions on the preliminaries, I told him the whole story. He said that I would always have the opportunity to accumulate good preliminaries, but it was exceptional to get so much help when prostrating all the way to Lhasa. After pondering over it for three or four days, I finally decided to go prostrating with him.

By that time, my Chinese companion had already reached a good distance away from my home. If I started prostrating from home, I wouldn't be able to catch up with him. So I joined him by car where he had reached by prostrating, and we then prostrated together. I decided that I would prostrate later from my home to where I had caught up with him, to make up for my late start. When I arrived, he was just by himself, so he was delighted to see me. All types of things happened on the way. They said later that they had shot more than two thousand hours of rough cut. It must be very difficult to edit it to a one to two-hour film. It is currently being made and is in progress. Jigme Trinle is the director of this film. Gen-la was the executive producer; and Tsemdo, Rabten, Akhang, Dolma Kyap were also part of the crew. There was also a monk who helped us carry our luggage.

I met Gen-la for the first time when we arrived in Lhasa. Gen-la, his wife, and his son were waiting for us in front of the Jokhang with *khata* scarves in their hands. I had never met him before, but that day I was very happy to talk to him without any shyness. He asked me a lot

about my past and my goals for the future. Generally, as we were on our way to Lhasa, prostrating, the Chinese man told me that Gen-la was writing the script for the movie *Snow Leopard*. I was a little surprised back then, as a film about snow leopard is exorbitant due to special effects. Until then, no Tibetan had been able to make such a film, owing to excessive cost. So I ask the Chinese man jokingly to help me get a role in that film. And he replied jokingly that he would certainly ask Gen-la.

But in fact, neither did he ask Gen-la and nor did I tell him directly that I wanted to play in the film. But Gen-la looked at the two thousand hours of rough cuts and chose me. Here is how it happened: On 20 August 2021, Tashi, a fellow countryman who had played in the films *Jinpa* and *Balloon*,²⁷ left me a message, saying that Gen-la had chosen me to play in his movie.

I thought I would probably be playing a secondary character in the movie, with few scenes; so I accepted the proposal. Then I discussed it with my Chinese friend, with whom I had prostrated. At that time we were both in Nangchen. He also said that I would probably be playing mostly short scenes. I replied that I would be happy just acting in the movie, whatever the length of the scenes.

But I was unsure, since I had not yet seen the script. Then one day I received it, with a message: “There is a monk in this film. This is the character you are going to play.” I read the script once

²⁷ Tashi is from Yushu and he has been working with Pema Tseden and other Tibetan filmmakers for many years. He is especially in care of finding casts for the films.

from beginning to end. I thought, "The monk has a major role in the film. There might be another one, and maybe I will play that part of the monk with fewer scenes." I read the script two or three times. But there was only one monk in the film. That frightened me somehow. In addition, the script only reached me four days prior to the beginning of shooting. What's more—the play was going to be performed in Amdo Tibetan, which I did not know at all. So I asked a friend from Amdo to read in Amdo Tibetan the lines I had to play, and to send them to me via WeChat. I listened to his voice messages and thus memorized my entire lines. Gen-la had told me to come to Matö, a place about three hundred kilometers from my home. I was torn between two feelings: On the one hand, I felt some sort of anguish then; but, on the other hand, I had memorized all my lines, and that gave me a little confidence.

I had watched many times Gen-la's movies such as *Balloon* and *Jinpa*. A van was arranged for us to go to Matö. When I opened the door of the van, some actors who had performed in Gen-la's other films, among others Jinpa himself, were already there. That made me even more nervous. In the film *Jinpa*, he was quite scary, so I thought it would be the same in real life. But later, they all cracked jokes at each other and the atmosphere became very congenial. Gen-la who thought I didn't speak Amdo Tibetan had arranged for an Amdo guy to dub me in the postproduction stage after we had finished filming. When I told them I had memorized all the dialogues by heart and he should not worry, they did not believe me. Tashi told me not to say such a thing, because if it didn't work out, it would be shameful. I said I had spoken the truth.

After a while, we all got together and rehearsed. I had memorized the whole play from beginning to end, so I recited it in its entirety. Gen-la said that we should have all cameras and other equipment ready to go there the next day for the rehearsal. I was very anxious. Jinpa and Gedun Phuntsok felt my anxiety and said, “Don’t worry, there is no reason to be afraid.” But this was easier said than done. I couldn’t sleep that night.

The next day, we went to the shooting location. There was a scene in which I had to talk a little before entering the car. After I had done it, Gen-la told me “Start with your lines!” and immediately, my fear disappeared. When playing the role, it felt as if it was real life. After it was over, the teacher said, “It went on well. No need to worry.” When I heard the teacher’s words, I felt kind of confident about myself.

So this is how the shooting started. It was just after the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, and it was the most frightening time. We thought that the pandemic would create obstacles, but fortunately, our location was in a remote area, so the pandemic was hardly felt. It was equally smooth with Gen-la: he was always even-tempered during the shooting. He never showed anger. Even if we sometimes giggled during the shooting, Gen-la never got angry. If we laughed too much, the teacher would just say, “Please stop!” and we all would automatically get our focus back.

As Gen-la directed without coercion, we actors felt a kind of encouragement, naturally. In my case—all my colleagues had studied film before, so I obviously became convinced that I had to work much harder than them. Although Gen-la did not give me specific

instructions, I tried to act as if I was really experiencing the feelings of the character, and I did not just avail myself with mere acting.

All the staff working under Gen-la were Tibetans, except for the one Chinese actor. One of the main reasons we all respected him was that he was a wonderful person besides a wonderful artist. We actors thought we were working very hard, but it was nothing compared to him. If we shot in the morning, we would have a good afternoon's sleep. But we hardly ever saw him sit down and rest or sleep. If he had a little free time, he would read the next day's script and make plans over it. Witnessing that, we naturally really felt that we must really work harder. Whenever, for example, the scenes to be shot were over at noon, Gen-la would read in the evening the scripts that other directors had submitted to him, seeking advice, and he would think about changes that had to be made, etc. To be honest, we never saw him sleep.

Among the Tibetans who worked with Gen-la, there was not much difference between the actors, the technicians, and other staff. Even the actors, when not on stage, carried things up and down, and so on. Everyone was very close and united. In the world of Chinese cinema, being an actor is supposed to be very prestigious, so there is no tradition of them helping the staff. There was only one Chinese actor in the whole film. When he saw us Tibetan actors very close and helping one another, he had no other option than to help us, the Tibetan staff, when he had no role to perform. In Han China, he has thirty million followers; thus, he can be considered rather famous. At the end of the forty-day shooting, this Chinese actor's face had turned totally dark, like that of a Tibetan. We formed a tight-knit community and worked

closely during the shooting, and I think this is all thanks to Gen-la. When he was there, directing the film, the people who worked under him never spoke badly of others or fought.

Snow Leopard was shot in Matö, a place located 4000 meters above sea level. We shot the film in October when the temperature was six or seven Celsius degrees below zero. It was the coldest time of the year. I always thought that since I had no experience in acting, I should try harder than the rest of the people. If in a scene my character had to be frozen, I would go up the mountain an hour or half an hour beforehand, take off my clothes, rub snow on myself; in brief, I really made myself freeze. We had an actress named Yangdrontso who told me, “Tseten Tashi, you don’t have to do that. You can just act as if you’re frozen. If you keep doing like that, you’ll get sick.” But I was so inexperienced in acting that I always felt that if I performed the part of a frozen person without being actually frozen, the fakeness of it would show.

Gen-la’s films are different in the way that we actors didn’t have to make our faces up or anything like that. But when it came to clothes, whatever we were wearing, we had to keep them on all the time, and we did not change them. I wore the same outfit for 40 days, never took it off even once.

Gen-la’s very latest movie is called *Singpangtra* (སིང་པང་བླ་མ་) in Tibetan. This name refers to a place in Bathang, Kham. I don’t know if it has a definite title in English, but if we translate the Chinese title, it is *Stranger*. Gen-la directed most of the movie, but his son, Jigme, completed it. From an artistic point of view “*Stranger*” is even better

than *Snow Leopard*. Jigme said that his late father was hopeful to be selected at the forthcoming Venice Film Festival.

Tseten Tashi’s Conversation with the Audience

Student: Is *Snow Leopard* based upon a real story, and if so, where did the story take place? What were the local people’s thoughts when it happened?

Tseten Tashi: In the given valley, a snow leopard really penetrated into an enclosure and killed many sheep, and in that valley, there was a monk, known as the ‘Snow Leopard lama,’ who had developed a special relationship with that animal. These things are real. But I was not aware of them until I played in the movie. Moreover, I have never met the Snow Leopard lama in person. But Dechen Yangdzom, who plays Jinpa’s wife in the film *Jinpa*, as well as Gendun Phuntsok, both told me about him and the events, on the shooting. BBC, or perhaps Discovery Channel, contacted the monk when they were making a documentary about snow leopards. The snow leopard would roam around without being afraid of the monk, so the monk helped them to film the snow leopard and they were able to make their film. The Snow Leopard lama must be from Amdo.

Student: The Snow Leopard lama certainly has developed a closeness with his environment. What is this like?

Tseten Tashi: The relationship between the Snow Leopard lama and the snow leopard is not something that other locals can see. I heard that this monk has been enjoying taking pictures of the local

scenery since childhood. So when he went up into the mountains to take pictures, it is as if the scenery and nature had grown up along with him. Moreover, perhaps the snow leopard got used to his red robes and ended up recognizing him. If someone else had gone there, it would have been different. When the monk published online the pictures he had taken, many people saw them and asked who the photographer was. They understood it was that monk himself. When they asked how he could have taken those pictures, they realized that he had a special relationship with the snow leopard.

Generally speaking, it is not only snow leopards that are concerned. Deer, lynx, antelopes, wild cats, wild birds, and other animals can actually be seen not far from or even among monks and nuns who live in remote monasteries or who are in retreat. While the animals do not fear monks and nuns, when we laymen get close, they all run away. This is specifically due to the kindness and compassion of those monks and nuns, I guess.

Student: No matter how many people are at Serta monastery, animals are not afraid of humans and live near them. All monks and nuns there are vegetarians: do you think that the animals sense this?

Tseten Tashi: For me, this is one hundred percent true. For example, in my homeland there is a nunnery. When we look from a distance, we see nuns sitting among deers and antelopes. But when we go near, the animals run away. Also, there is a monastery on the cliff. Every night the bears come down to the monastery to eat. The monks can touch them, and bears do not harm them. They eat everything they need to eat and then they go back up. You may have seen the videos

of this on the internet.²⁸

Student: In the movie, the snow leopard bites many sheep on the neck and kill them. Were these sheep real? You are a vegetarian: from your point of view, what do you feel when you see such scenes?

Tseten Tashi: The sheep are not real. We went to the slaughterhouse and bought the skins of slaughtered sheep. We stuffed them with clothing and made them look like sheep. I felt more comfortable not having scenes in which I had to touch the fake sheep. Yangdrontso, who played the snow leopard in the film, would always scream when she had to touch those sheep skin.

Student: What was your experience of acting in that movie? Do you have plans to continue to act in movies in the future?

Tseten Tashi: I was totally ignorant about cinema before [acting in Pema Tseden’s film]. So when I arrived on the shooting set, I came with a feeling that if I could quickly wrap up my scenes, I would be able to go home equally soon. But when the film shooting was over, forty days later, we had become so attached to one other that separation was difficult. At that time, Gen-la and all my workmates asked me if I would like to act in the future. I had been contemplating that, but because of the huge change [i.e. Pema Tseden’s death], I am not so sure anymore. Before that, Gen-la said, “First, go back, think carefully and then answer.” I thought hard for a month because I did not find it right

²⁸ Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pE8dvtKQnoM>

to say to someone like Gen-la, “I am determined to being an actor now” without a pure determination. So after thinking hard, I told Gen-la, “Please introduce me to a good school where I can study to become a good actor.” Gen-la replied, “As a human, it is most important to make good decisions. There is no need to be in such a hurry right now; take your time.” Since I had made up my mind, I thought I should take a step along this path. I started reading cinema-related books that Gen-la had advised to me and watching carefully a film that had been made before 1936.²⁹ I studied it, thought about it, took notes on my phone. In 2023, when I went to Venice, Tokyo, and so on, I realized that film was indeed a very powerful media. I had heard that Gen-la had a huge reputation on the international stage, but I had never really witnessed it personally. But in Venice, I saw that it was not only us Tibetans but also Italians who were also crying over the sudden death of Gen-la. In the same way, when the film was over, they came over to me, shook my hands, saying “Thank you!” So I realized that what one calls “cinema” is not just an ordinary thing; right? It is very powerful. And I thought that in the future, I had a part to play in it.

I used to think that cinema was mere entertainment. But after my acquaintance with Gen-la, my vision changed. I am now absolutely disinterested in watching fighting scenes. I have reached a point where I feel that the slower, artistic scenes, which show real life, are so much more important. I have watched a great deal of more artistic and realistic films. So sometimes when I watch the kind of films I used to like, I lose interest after ten or twenty minutes.

²⁹ The title of that film was unclear during the interview, and thus, it is lost in translation. Apologies to our readers.

Student: What was the most memorable event in the entire filming process?

Tseten Tashi: I can still remember vividly all the scenes I had to play, but a special one was in which I had to pretend to be frozen after the snow leopard took me up the mountain. Initially, I thought I could pretend to be frozen to perform the scene, but I found out that although from the outside, I could perform the physical expression of what it was like to be frozen, when it came to speaking, and there were many lines, the tone in my voice utterly failed to express my emotions. So I thought I had no choice but to become really frozen. Why? Because forty or fifty of us were coming up the mountain with all the equipment, so it would certainly not be fine not to try my best. So the second day I went up the mountain an hour early, took off all my clothes, and sat down for about ten minutes. Although I was feeling already quite weak, however hard did I try, I still did not feel cold. As a solution, I rubbed my body with the snow on the mountain. So by the time I had been doing that for 20 minutes, I really started to feel frozen. It was so cold that snot dripping from my nose froze immediately, close to my lips, and I could just pull it out in one go.

At that point, I had to talk to the snow leopard and say “You are the snow leopard whose life I saved when I was a kid, right? I never thought you and I would meet on the day of my death. I may well be dying. When I am dead, please eat my body. I may be dead, but my mind will pledge to do charity [by giving you my body].” These were my lines. But when I said them, there were many people around, everyone was very quiet, the shooting was taking place on rocks, and my words echoed. I reached a point where I felt like I might really die.

After I spoke my lines, I felt so cold that I couldn't stand up. Strange sounds came out of my mouth. They said something had happened to my liver. Whatever, I couldn't stand up anymore. I had to be carried by two people from the top of the mountain to the bottom. The next day they said they really thought I was going to die.

Then, after the shooting was over, somewhere around March 2023, Gen-la told me that we had to record again the dialogue "I may well be dying" for the postproduction of the film. At that point, that one line was the only thing I had to say, but I gave a lot of thought to it, because I didn't think it was right to say it unless I was really physically cold. It was in March. It was very cold in Bathang. So I took off my shoes, my socks, my shirt and all, and just walked around. It didn't help. Then, there was a trough full of water for the cattle. I got into it. It still didn't help. Then I put my head in the water and drank. After two or three gulps, everything became black in my eyes. Then, after a few minutes, Gen-la called out to them, telling them to hurry. I had to repeat the line "I may well be dying" many times. Gen-la told me "Tseten, bear it, be strong!" At one point, I almost sobbed, saying "I may well be dying!" And Gen-la said, "Now that's a wrap!"

Sometimes we had to play a certain scene up to seventy-eight times, for fifteen minutes, without interruption. When we reached the thirtieth scene, we were not very concentrated anymore. What I understood later is that we did not know which take, out of the seventy, the director was going to edit in the film. He may even choose the scene you did not find the best among the seventy plus; right? So, no matter how many times you repeat it, it is extremely important to always do it carefully. Now, to return to the part I just mentioned, we went to the

mountains for five or six days, and every time we shot the same scene thirty or forty times. As I did not know which take he was going to select, I acted as best as I could.

A member of Tibetan community in France: In the movie, your Amdo accent does not sound very natural, right? Is it involuntary or deliberate, to show that this is not your native dialect? When you acted in the film, did this sometimes give you difficulties, for instance did it happen that you would not understand the conversations in Amdo Tibetan?

Tseten Tashi: As I said, the script only reached me four days before the shooting started. I already knew Kham and Lhasa Tibetan, but I didn't speak Amdo. Besides, there are big differences between Amdo, Kham, and Lhasa Tibetan; right? So I asked a friend of mine who spoke Amdo to help me with the script. I memorized it. Gen-la, who thought I wouldn't make it in such a short time, had arranged for a native Amdo speaking person to dub me in the post-production stage. For example, Lobsang Choephel, the actor who plays my father, is from Lhasa. He said he would not be able to learn Amdo Tibetan, so he performed only in his Lhasa dialect. In the post-production stage, Gen-la arranged for an Amdo person to dub him entirely. As for me, Gen-la never requested of me that I speak Amdo. But I considered it. I called Tashi again and asked him. He said I should speak Amdo. So I asked him in which specific Amdo dialect I should speak. Tashi said I did not have to go to such extent. So I asked a friend from Golok to read and send me the whole script in Golok Amdo Tibetan via WeChat. I listened to his messages all night and repeated them over and over until I could recite all my lines by heart.

A member of Tibetan community in France: I live in France, and I have seen many of Gen-la's movies, and that gave me some sort of hope. But his sudden death has filled me with sadness. You were fortunate to play in a movie by Gen-la. You must have been extremely saddened by Gen-la's sudden passing away. Gen-la's son aspires to a cinema career; right? Do you think that young people in Tibet will be able to carry on Gen-la's work?

Tseten Tashi: Generally speaking, it was very difficult to make films for people like Gen-la. It took him at least ten years to establish a career. At the time of Gen-la's sudden demise, hundreds of people like us worked in offices that Gen-la has established, and who worked with Gen-la, like me. While he was alive, we never worried at all. No one ever thought that he would pass away so suddenly. When that happened, we all became orphans, and then we were stranded, not knowing what to do. But the work Gen-la has left behind, Gen-la's hopes, we must strive to keep them alive. He died suddenly, but the younger generation raised by Gen-la must carry forward his hopes and live up to his trust. Because the evening when Gen-la passed away, the last message he left for us was: "You, the younger generation of film directors, you must work hard!" This is the last message he sent before passing away. Now, many among us pledge to work hard to make good movies, whatever we do. So, there is 100% hope for Tibetan cinema in the future.

Now, when we think about Gen-la, on the one hand, we are saddened and sometimes cry. But on the other hand, although his death was a great loss to us, we think that Gen-la has finally found some rest. Because he had no time to rest when he was alive. I heard that

he sometimes slept only three hours a night. He was always working. Now, to whom has the loss been inflicted? We are the ones who have lost everything. We have lost the opportunity to study with him, the opportunity to be cared for by him. And this is a huge loss.

Student: After his death, is his *namshé*³⁰ looking for someone to carry on his legacy?

Tseten Tashi: To be honest, all Tibetan filmmakers were given opportunities to meet Gen-la. Whoever wanted to study with him, whoever wished to meet, Gen-la would always give them a chance. So the persons in whom Gen-la saw some potential, he has already nurtured them by educating them.

Student: After the death of Mr. Pema Tseden, many people in and out of Tibet wrote about him and expressed their appreciation in various ways, be it literary or artistic. Many of his friends praised him. As someone who worked close to late Pema Tseden, what is your most valuable memory of him? Do you feel any regret now, looking back? Do you feel, “Oh, I should have done this when he was alive?”

Tseten Tashi: Whenever I think about Gen-la now, the only image that comes to my mind is him looking at me with a smile. As for my regret, here it is: when he was alive, I never managed to thank him in person,

³⁰ This Tibetan word translates with difficulty in Western languages. It means “flow of consciousness” or “spirit.” Tibetans consider that a dead person’s *namshé* will survive him or her and carry on by integrating a new physical body – a process that is referred to as “reincarnation” in English.

but only on the phone. This haunts me. I always feel that if I had the opportunity to meet Gen-la in person now, I would hug him and say, “thank you!” (At this point, Tseten Tashi was choking and became silent).



Tseten Tashi (right) with J.M. Therouanne (left), holding the “Golden Cycle” awarded posthumously to Pema Tsenden for *Snow Leopard* at the Asian Cinema International Film Festival (FICA, France) on 13 February 2024 ©J.M. Therrouane

PEMA TSEDEN, THE WRITER

Reading Silences in the Short Stories of Pema Tseden

Michael Monhart

Abstract: This short article, a tribute and memory of Pema Tseden, is a reflection not only on the translation process of his short stories but more significantly on how to read his literary fiction. It is suggested that deeply embedded in his writing style is an invitation to imagination, to personally enter into the worlds he creates. As a way of conceptualizing this imaginative process, the article turns to the philosophical work of Paul Ricoeur and Gaston Bachelard.

Keywords: Pema Tseden, contemporary Tibetan literature, imagination, Ricoeur, Bachelard

If I tell you my dream, you might forget it. If I act upon my dream, perhaps you will remember it. But if I involve you, it becomes your dream too. (Tibetan proverb used at the opening of Pema Tseden's film *Jinpa*)

The experience of reading presents oscillating levels of depiction. When we read quickly, even if it's a novel with very concrete elements, we don't take the time to develop images. The images we have are only light supports of our thoughts, and then the schematic images are not expanded.

They are merely nascent and fading illustrations of the new facts, the new events, the new relationships between things.
(Ricoeur 241)

Pema Tseden's films are marked by silences. After the protagonist Tharlo, in the film of the same name, returns from town to his sheep herd, we have about eleven minutes where the only words are from songs but even those are sparse indications of whatever Tharlo could be thinking or feeling. At the end of the film, there are almost five minutes with no dialogue, mostly just Tharlo riding his motorbike into the mountains. What is going on inside of him? Both sets of scenes could be described in a few sentences in a short story where they could be read through in a matter of seconds.

In 2018, Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani and myself (with translation contributions from Françoise Robin and Carl Robertson) curated and published a selection of short stories by Pema Tseden. The book *Enticement: Stories of Tibet* unfortunately garnered few reviews and not much attention. Anecdotally, I received comments such as, "I don't really understand what is going on in the stories" and "I like his films better." Surely, there are ambiguities in the stories. The writing does not provide verbose descriptions of either external situations or internal emotions. Even though I am an exceedingly slow translator and spent much time with the stories, since their publication I have increasingly come to view that rather than being simple, the stories are precisely crafted to invite us into imagination.

In Pema Tseden's own words from his, characteristically, terse author's Preface in *Enticement*:

Sometimes I don't know what kind of person I am—how who I was and who I am are related or different, or who my future self will end up being. Often, in both my life and my creative work, I find myself in a bewildered and helpless state, to the point of not finding a sense of direction or an exit point. But when I enter an exceptionally creative writing mood, I seem to be able to break away from perplexity and passiveness. My body and mind slowly relax to follow that wonderful rhythm that allows me to enter my inner world, into the inner worlds of the characters of my stories. In these moments I feel completely at ease.

This is also the time I can see more clearly into myself—can see some of my inner passion, sincerity, fragility, pettiness. Many times I write fiction for no other reason than to enter this state in which I can see and know myself more deeply.

All the words you want to say can be found in the texts you write. (1)

Pema Tseden writes of entering the inner worlds of his characters. Note the choice of words here—he does not say that he is ‘describing’ or ‘depicting,’ rather, he is ‘relaxing’ into a state where he can follow the rhythm into the worlds of his characters. Pema was an overgenerous man. He was absolutely indefatigable in his mentoring and assistance for young Tibetan writers and filmmakers. Many times, when with him I observed this dedication. I see this generosity in his artistic creations; in both his stories and in his movies, Pema created

worlds into which we could imagine. He didn't preach, he didn't try to push his view of a story or a scene upon his readership or audience. When translating the stories, we sought to preserve a very deliberate and considered ambiguity that reflected the complexities of being human. We, as readers, do not have to lose ourselves to enter the world of his works; instead, he invites us into an imaginal space where we can wonder together. This view is expressed in the Tibetan proverb which opens the film *Jinpa*: "If I tell you my dream, you might forget it. If I act upon my dream, perhaps you will remember it. But if I involve you, it becomes your dream too."

In reading his short stories, I suggest we read silence into them. In cinematic terms, we must take a long shot between sentences.³¹ But this is not a passive silence; it can be, as he wrote in the author's Preface, an entry mood, i.e., an entry into imagination. Body and mind relax into an ease that perhaps enables, by entering into the worlds of the characters of his stories, a way we can see more deeply into ourselves.

What is the nature of this way in? In my daily work as a psychoanalyst, I have increasingly come to recognize the efficacy of imagination as a way to see into all the facets of ourselves, the passions, sincerity, fragility, and pettiness that he writes about in the author's Preface. In this regard, I have delved into the work of whom I will call the 'French Imaginalists'—among others, Paul Ricoeur and

³¹ Lauran R. Hartley in her insightful blurb for *Enticement* used the phrase "literary long shots" to describe Pema Tseden's short story writing style.

Gaston Bachelard.³² All these imaginalists were investigators of the way of imagination; and here in this essay, as a little philosophical detour in these reflections, I look at some of their writings as possible suggestions into how to read Pema Tseden, or how to become involved in his dreams so that they become ours also.

The quotation from Ricoeur's newly published *Lectures on Imagination* noted at the beginning of this essay is, in the context of his thought on imagination, more than an injunction to read slowly. The purpose is to expand, through imagination, what Ricoeur calls the schematic images and let them develop into the 'new relationship between things.' I will circle back to the nature of this 'new relationship' as expressive of an ontological dimension of 'inner worlds' as Pema Tseden references in his reflection on the act of writing in the Author's Preface.

The publication in 2024 of Ricoeur's *Lectures on Imagination*, delivered in 1975 at the University of Chicago, gives us a clearer picture into the role that imagination plays throughout the entirety of his works. In the lectures, Ricoeur first examines the history of philosophical thinking on imagination, dialectically working through,

³² I also include Gilbert Durand and Henri Corbin in this grouping but for issues of space and a desire to focus on Pema Tseden and not on philosophy I will only suggest references to their works. While little of Durand's work has been translated into English, one of his main works *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary* is available along with a more succinct summary of his views in his article "Exploration of the Imaginal" in Sells, ed. 2022. Many of Corbin's books are available in English translation. For a brief explication of his concepts see "*Mundus Imaginalis*, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal" also in Sells, ed. 2022. While none of these authors are contemporary, it was a new publication of Ricoeur's *Lectures on Imagination* and his use of Bachelard, that prompted these reflections on reading Pema.

among others, the thinking of Aristotle, Kant, Wittgenstein, Husserl, and Sartre on the subject. In his engagement with previous philosophers' concepts, Ricoeur describes two types of imagination—reproductive and productive. Simply put, a reproductive image is generated from a referent that already exists. Imagination is relegated to reproducing an image, making a mental copy of it. Ricoeur turns to fiction to demonstrate the nature of productive imagination which, in contrast to the reproductive, proceeds without an existing referent. Indeed, “fiction builds its own referent and therefore opens new ontological possibilities that were blocked by the already existing, by the previous existence of the reference in the case of absence” (Ricoeur 218).³³

There are two key points for our reading of Pema Tseden's stories here: fiction as building or creating its own referents, and that there is an ontological dimension to these referents that we imagine in reading fiction.

In the lectures focusing on fiction, Ricoeur turns initially to Bachelard and his description of how in the act of reading a poem (for Bachelard) or fiction (Ricoeur), an image creates through reverberation its own existence within us, and in so doing, comes into being:

Through this reverberation, by going immediately beyond all psychology or psychoanalysis, we feel a poetic power rising naively within us. After the original reverberation, we are able to experience resonances, sentimental

³³ The “reference in the case of absence” is in critique of Sartre's phenomenology of absence.

repercussions, reminders of our past. But the image has touched the depths before it stirs the surface. And this is also true of a simple experience of reading. The image offered us by reading the poem now becomes really our own. It takes root in us. It has been given us by another, but we begin to have the impression that we could have created it, that we should have created it. It becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being. (Bachelard xxiii)

The act of reading then becomes a space of letting the images, the situations, and the twists and turns of a narrative reverberate in us, generating new possibilities of being. Ricoeur goes as far as saying new realities—“As I keep saying, fiction does not reproduce previous reality as does the picture; it opens new reality” (Ricoeur 276). If we can read slowly, letting the reverberations of the narrative work in and on us, then perhaps we can be more fully involved in the ‘dream’ as is proposed by the Tibetan proverb in *Jinpa*.

The shock and sadness of Pema Tseden’s unexpected passing still reverberates in me. I had thought there would still be plenty of time, for movies, for more translations of stories, for discussions about reading and writing. He was not a man of many words in conversations! But I would have so welcomed the opportunity to ask him more about that inner state that he found in writing, that inner state of creating and exploring his inner worlds. I do know that in our translation work with his stories he strongly emphasized preserving

ambiguity. The last line of the story “Men and Dog” reads, “One cannot say whether the expressions on their faces were of satisfaction or sorrow” (Pema Tseden 48). We discussed the translation, and he was firm in not leaning toward either satisfaction or sorrow, of not prescribing the reader’s feeling. Likewise, in the story “Orgyan’s Teeth,” we are not explicitly told just how the main character really feels toward his reincarnate lama playmate. We have to involve ourselves in the story; we have to feel our way into the story and let the resonances within us arise.

How to read his stories? I would like to suggest that we read them like they were one of his films. That is, slowly, with long stretches of silence. Lauren Hartley in her prepublication praise for *Enticement* wrote, “In literary long shots, the author transforms grasslands, snowy expanses, and county seats into mindscapes...”³⁴ Can we read with ‘literary long shots?’ For example, imagine at the beginning of the story “Gang” actually being the shepherd, having the dream, walking out in the snow and moonlight, and finding the small child. Instead of reading through this passage in a minute or two, could we literally take a few minutes and imagine ourselves, involve ourselves in the story, take advantage of the open spaces of imagination given to us by the author, and let the characters and the scene come alive in us, make a new reality in ourselves?

Pema Tseden was indeed an overgenerous person, but I think his generosity most expressively is manifested in his stories. In their

³⁴ Quoted from the first page before the title page of *Enticement*.

often relatively simple narratives, in the ambiguity, and in the sparse description of internal states, I believe we are most generously given the opportunity to journey along with him into the worlds of the stories. While we have lost the chance for more stories from him, the stories and films we do have can continually give us his thoughtfully crafted explorations of the many dimensions of our human life.

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Michael Monhart (left, Pema Tseden (center) and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani,
New York, September 25, 2016, photo ©Michael Monhart

Faith and Identity in Pema Tsenden's "Orgyan's Teeth" (ཨ་

ཐུན་གྱི་སྤྲོ་)

Erin Burke

Abstract : Pema Tsenden (1969–2023) was Tibet's most influential filmmaker at the time of his recent death. He also composed short stories that, like his celebrated films, reflect the deep influence traditional forms of Tibetan storytelling, including oral folktales, the Gesar epic, Buddhist narratives, and Tibetan opera, had on his creative work. This essay analyzes one of his more well-known stories, "Orgyan's Teeth," written in Tibetan language and first published in 2012. In it, a first-person narrator recounts his relationship with a childhood friend who was recognized as a reincarnated lama as a teenager and died at the age of twenty. It is a puzzling story that raises more questions than it answers, from Orgyan's unusual obsession with a math equation to the narrator's ambiguous conclusion of the story. I offer a reading that identifies two intertextual references that set up expectations for interpretative resolutions, only to thwart them. The first is a didactic Buddhist narrative about faith, and the second is a type of character that appears in oral traditions, the advice of Buddhist teachers, and modern fiction: lamas of questionable knowledge and morals. It further asks how the narrator's grieving process, his conspicuous omission of the cause of Orgyan's death, and the

seemingly nonsensical numerical references introduce novel contexts in which to think with those familiar narratives and characters. I argue that the story goes beyond depicting ambivalence between modern and traditional frameworks of meaning by demonstrating how they come to be in conversation with each other.

Keywords: Pema Tseden, Tibetan literature, Buddhism, reincarnation, grief

Pema Tseden is internationally known for his celebrated films which portray Tibetan life with both authenticity and singular creativity. He was also a prolific writer of short stories and novels, which, though garnering less attention than his films, are also well-loved and have been translated into several languages, including French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Czech, and English.³⁵ He engaged in translation of his own work, composing stories in both Tibetan and Chinese, and even translating, or re-writing, some of his Tibetan stories into Chinese.³⁶ Many of his Tibetan language stories are strange, or even fantastical. A talking corpse introduces a man to firearms in “Golden Corpse-Gun,” where Pema Tseden builds on an extended excerpt of a classical Golden Corpse tale. A transparent girl appears in the snow one night in “Gang,” and a musician spends years chasing the woman from his recurring dream until the dream crosses over into reality and ends tragically in “The Dream of a Wandering

³⁵ For English translations see *Enticement* (2018), an anthology of Pema Tseden's stories edited by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani and Michael Monhart. An English translation of “The Dream of a Wandering Minstrel” appears in the anthology, *Old Demons, New Deities* (2017).

³⁶ Schiaffini-Vedani “Translator's Introduction” in *Enticement* (viii–ix).

Minstrel.”³⁷ He also wrote stories about the everyday lives of ordinary Tibetans in contemporary social settings, and “Orgyan’s Teeth” is one such story.

“Orgyan’s Teeth” (ཨ་རྒྱལ་གྱི་སྤྲི་མོ།) a Tibetan language story, was originally published in 2012 in the literary journal *Drangchar* (སྒྲང་ཆར།, Soft Rain).³⁸ In a series of vignettes, a first-person narrator remembers his friend, Orgyan, who died at the age of twenty. The two boys attend their first five years of school together, until the narrator continues on to middle- and high school in town, as their village only has a primary school. Orgyan, who did not continue his education, is recognized as a *tulku*, or reincarnated lama, at the age of eighteen. The narrator frankly describes his initial reluctance to treat his old school friend as a revered spiritual figure, refusing to prostrate at Orgyan’s enthronement ceremony and using the common phrase, “to pass on from life” (ཆེ་ལས་འདས་པ་) to refer to Orgyan’s death, instead of the respectful expression, “to pass into nirvana” (སྐུ་ཕྱེད་འཕྲུལ་ལས་འདས་པ་). The narrator goes on to explain how he began to develop faith in Orgyan before he died. The story ends with the narrator’s realization that among the relics enshrined in the stupa memorializing Orgyan is one of his own baby teeth that was discarded at Orgyan’s home when they were both just ordinary young boys playing together.

³⁷ The Golden Corpse, or corpse tales (རྩ་སྒྲུང་།) refers to a popular corpus of folk tales, the early Sanskrit versions of which are attributed to Nagarjuna. After these were translated into Tibetan, they entered the oral tradition, and Tibetan storytellers have continued to add to the genre.

³⁸ Although electronic copies of *Drangchar* are difficult to access, the original Tibetan and the English translation by Michael Monhart that appears in *Enticement* are available on Machik Khabda’s website. <https://www.machikkhabda.org/enticement.html>. Accessed April 20, 2024.

While not a biting critique, the imposter tooth ‘relic’ and the narrator’s awkward transition—from feeling intellectually superior to Orgyan to requesting blessings from him—reflects the ambivalence some contemporary educated Tibetans feel toward traditional religious practices and institutions. It is possible to read this story, as some have, as a lighthearted reminder not to take religion too seriously.³⁹ It is a testament to Pema Tseden’s gift for creating vivid characters with humor and texture that the story can be read this way. But “Orgyan’s Teeth” is also a confounding little story that resists interpretive resolution and subtly unsettles the reader.

The narrator repeats a refrain, indicating what the ‘main thing’ about the story is several times, each time referring to Orgyan’s death from a different perspective. As the story moves from a mildly irreverent sketch of Orgyan as a bad student through memories that cast him in a more favorable light, the qualities of the relationship between the two men change, as does the effect of the story and the grief it conveys. The tone of the story oscillates between lighthearted bemusement and ponderous disclosure. Intertextual appearances including a Buddhist didactic story, a trope in modern Tibetan fiction, and even a strange math equation send the reader’s attention down a maze of paths, managing to obscure the direct referent of the repeated interjections about Orgyan’s death—the actual circumstances of the death itself.⁴⁰

³⁹ For example, one reviewer of *Enticement* (2018) said of “Orgyan’s Teeth,” “This is not a story of philosophical questions but, instead, is told with a chuckle and a gentle irreverence toward those who put too much weight on the idea of pure holiness” (Suleski, 233).

⁴⁰ At this point, the uses and abuses of Kristeva’s term, *intertextuality*, which she first introduced

This essay offers a close reading of this story which attempts to make sense of some of its more perplexing moments. The religious, artistic, and social elements listed above do not serve only as allusions or influences. The story creates a space for the reader to reimagine these texts and their interpretative frameworks, which is to say to use them to think *with*.

The story does not follow a tidy progression. Reading it is a bit like being shown close-ups of details of a larger picture, each of which makes forming an image of the whole more difficult but also more interesting.

In the following, I explore how the story accomplishes that effect and how it deploys familiar literary elements in the service of augmenting the kinds of subjectivities and interpretative strategies we might expect from them. I discuss two intertextual references that complicate and enrich the short vignettes of the narrator's memories. I then conclude with a more speculative reading of the significance of two numerical elements of the story that stand out as non-sequiturs. The first is Orgyan's preoccupation with the mathematical equation $1+1=3$. The second is the last "main thing" the narrator asserts, that the contents of the stupa built to memorialize Orgyan include fifty-eight teeth.

in "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966), have been debated extensively by literary scholars. Kristeva herself began using another term, transposition, to emphasize the phenomena that went beyond allusion, reference, or influence to transform the 'original' texts. I use the term *intertextual* here to emphasize the argument that the presence of these other texts defies the expected effects of allusions to them. Thus to make sense of why they appear, the reader begins to transform her understanding of those texts themselves as well in the course of interpreting Pema Tsenden's story. See Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, for a clear and thorough discussion of the evolution of Kristeva's thinking and her intellectual interlocutors.

In this reading, I center the narrator's experience of grief as a catalyst for interpretive revisioning, both for the character of the narrator himself as well as for the reader. I argue that the intertextuality of multiple elements in the story works to defy neat resolutions and invites repeated and unconventional applications of all available interpretative resources, much like the experience of grief can.

Tulkus and Teeth

The narrator's account of his relationship with Orgyan contains intertextual references to two captivating character types from Tibetan literature: indecorous tulkus and lamas and an old woman with unwavering faith. The second sentence of the story introduces the title character as a tulku who was recognized at the age of eighteen, and the narrator's first anecdote about Orgyan explains that he could not prostrate the first time he saw his friend as a newly enthroned tulku. He follows this by explaining that Orgyan was so bad at math in primary school that he had to copy the narrator's homework for five years. Thus, he does not consider Orgyan to be more intelligent than himself—higher intelligence being a justification for reverence in his estimation.

While his character sketch does not accuse Orgyan of an egregious moral failing, his skepticism draws to mind a number of questionable lamas from popular modern Tibetan literature. Perhaps the most notorious example of these is the title character of the story "Tulku" (ལྷོ་ལྷོ་སྒྲིལ་) by Dondrup Gyel, published in the literary magazine

Drangchar in 1981.⁴¹ The story depicts a con-man who passes himself off as a reincarnated lama to a small community, giving dubious blessings and teachings, all the while sexually harassing young women and stealing valuables from the families who trusted him, infamously earning Dondrup Gyel not only harsh criticism but death threats as well.⁴² Revered scholars and religious leaders too have warned the public about individuals who exploit religious titles and authority for their own gain, differentiating between genuine religious teachers and opportunists.⁴³ At the same time, some Tibetan intellectuals have critiqued religion as a whole, citing these forms of authority and the opportunities for abuse they provide.⁴⁴

Religious scoundrels come to life in all their colorful shamelessness and cruelty in modern Tibetan fiction, both comic and tragic forms.⁴⁵ Thus, when the narrator begins with a reason *not*

⁴¹ An English translation by Kate Hartmann and Sangye Tendar Naga was published in *The Tibet Journal* in 2013.

⁴² Matthew Kapstein's "The Tulku's Miserable Lot" has been widely cited. In it, he acknowledges that references to immoral or deceptive religious authorities are not new phenomena in Tibetan literature but argues that Dondrup Gyel's timing and status as a layperson provoked this vigorous criticism. His story was published not long after the violent anti-religious years of the Cultural Revolution. In the decades since 1981, tolerance for such characters has grown. See also Lama Jabb, "Tibet's Critical Tradition and Modern Tibetan Literature," for a discussion of criticism that explores a diversity of genres, including the corpse tales mentioned above.

⁴³ See for example Nicole Willock, "The Revival of the Tulku Institution in Modern China: Narratives and Practices."

⁴⁴ Tragyal, who publishes under the pseudonym Shokdung (བཀྲ་ཤུག་ རྒྱལ་པོ་ b. 1963), is perhaps the most well-known of these figures.

⁴⁵ I am confining this essay to a brief analysis of one story, but for a thorough discussion of images of problematic lamas, see Gayley and Bhumi, "Parody and Pathos: Sexual Transgression by 'Fake' Lamas in Tibetan Short Stories." They contrast comedic figures created by male authors with female writers' attention to the victims of fake lamas' sexual deceptions and aggressions.

to accept Orgyan's authenticity as a religious authority, the reader anticipates any number of unsavory possibilities ahead. Yet, the anticipation of scandal or impropriety comes to nothing in "Orgyan's Teeth." The narrator's initial criticism seems to mean less and less as his memories of Orgyan's compassion and purity move into the foreground. He observes the devotion of others and takes it, too, as proof of Orgyan's enlightened qualities.

The intertextuality has paid off, though. The reader's imagination has already begun tracing paths of intriguing possibility rather than dwelling on the opening 'main point' of the story that directly precedes the narrator's indignant objection to Orgyan's newfound prestige. The first lines of the story read:

Orgyan was a friend of mine from primary school. All that is well known. Later on, Orgyan was identified as a reincarnate lama. All that is likewise well known. These are not the main things. The main thing is that when Orgyan reached the age of twenty, he died.⁴⁶

The narrator continues to punctuate his recollections throughout the story with clarifications about "the main thing" (གཞི་མཚན་). These are frank reminders that Orgyan's death occurred as the narrator was

Tsering Dondrup's shameless Alak Drongsang is also worth mentioning here as a character who comes to mind in association with possible tulku misbehavior. English translations of a collection of Tsering Dondrup's stories can be found in Christopher Peacock's *The Handsome Monk*.

⁴⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, I cite Michael Monhart's lovely translation from the anthology, *Enticement* (5).

reimagining their relationship and coming to terms with his friend's new status. Indeed, rather than the tulku institution's possibilities for corruption in the social sphere, the issue at the center of the story seems to be 'identity.' To be recognized as the reincarnation of a particular person poses serious questions of selfhood, particularly when the person recognized has already had years to develop a personality and social identity of his own, as is the case for Orgyan in the story.

Even without the transfer of property, religious charisma, and often political authority entailed in many tulku lineages, recognition of a close friend or family member can require someone to reassess not only their own sense of identity but their neighbors' and family members' expectations and emotional needs as well. The issue in these cases is less the sway of a religious institution imbued with social, political, and economic power than one of individual struggle with the clash between a personal sense of identity and religious and familial pressures.⁴⁷

In an analysis of short fiction and films that depict examples of ordinary people addressing the attendant conflicts and questions of reincarnation, Françoise Robin argues that fiction is a medium that

⁴⁷ Of course, this experience is not unheard of in contemporary Tibetan society. Dawa Ghoso, a reader of "Orgyan's Teeth," who organized a reading group through Machik Khabda, saw his own experience in the story. He describes feeling confused when one of his relatives was recognized as a tulku as an adult and remembers wondering "whether I can still call him 'chocho' as he was my favourite cousin brother." The question of having faith in the authenticity of the individual's spiritual bonafides does not exclude, or necessarily overshadow, the question of what happens to the original relationship, or the original identity of that person.

<https://www.machikkhabda.org/khabda-blog/thoughts-on-orgyans-teeth>. Accessed April 20, 2024.

allows for a space to “suspend belief” in doctrines such as rebirth. A story can present various perspectives in the voices of young and elder characters, as well as that of the author.⁴⁸ In the stories she discusses, ordinary people are recognized as deceased family members, for example. The younger person recognized as the new seat of that reborn consciousness must grapple with the plausibility of the concept of rebirth itself as well as the burden of the new, or additional, identity.

The first time the narrator sees Orgyan *as* a tulku is amidst an audience of devoted followers, and he balks at his parents’ insistence that he must prostrate, prompting the explanation of Orgyan’s lack of basic mathematical comprehension. This scene resembles the kind of juxtaposition Robin identifies, and like her examples, it is the older generation who voices the traditional view, while the younger generation questions its relevance in a specific context. The narrator’s stances on Orgyan’s spiritual authenticity and personal identity are not fixed.

When Orgyan’s followers ask the narrator about Orgyan’s qualities as a child, he begins to recall moments of moral purity and unusual compassion. He starts to talk about faith. The narrator does not reveal that his tooth is enshrined with Orgyan’s until the end of the story, but the “teeth” of the title paired with the topic of faith evoke a widely known story about a faithful old woman who unknowingly worships the tooth of a dog, which she believes to be a relic of the

⁴⁸ Robin, “Souls Gone in the Wind? Suspending Belief about Rebirth in Contemporary Artistic Works in the Tibetan World.” In his reading of “Orgyan’s Teeth,” Dawa Ghoso identifies feelings of ambivalence toward traditional views similar to the ones Robin observes.

Buddha. The story's popularity is due at least in part to its inclusion in Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, a commentary on the preliminary practices for the Longchen Nyingthik tradition. The story appears in the section on faith in the beginning of the extraordinary preliminaries, as part of the instructions on taking refuge.

The subject of the story is confident faith, which is an unwavering faith in the three jewels as the only reliable source of refuge. It follows Patrul Rinpoche's claim that one can receive no compassion from the three jewels without faith and conversely illustrates that the Buddha's compassion can reach a person with confident faith by any means. In the story, a devout old woman has a son who travels to Bodh Gaya often as a merchant, and she has asked him many times to bring her a special relic of the Buddha. This time, she says, if he does not bring one, she will kill herself in front of him. Of course, the careless son forgets this request yet again. He only remembers it when he is nearly home, and seeing a dog's skull on the ground, he takes one of the teeth and presents it to his mother as the Buddha's canine tooth. Even though the dog's tooth has none of the qualities of a genuine relic, because the old woman worships it with faith, it miraculously begins to produce tiny pearl relics (རིང་བསྐྱེལ་), as an authentic relic would. Her faith not only transforms the ordinary, even unclean, dog tooth into a conduit for the Buddha's compassion and blessings but her as well. When she dies, a halo of rainbow light appears around her body.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* (173–174).

Faith and Relations

Not unlike the intertextual effect of the tulku character, the connection to the lesson about confident faith does not parallel the behavior of the narrator. The point of the story of the old woman is that she is a model of confident faith. By invoking her with these elements of her story, does Pema Tseden mean to compare or contrast the narrator to her? The narrator in this story is neither a paragon of faith nor is he an example of someone who does not accept the value of faith. Moreover, the narrator's relationship to faith is not necessarily a consequence of ambivalence produced in the juxtaposition of modern education and religious tradition.

The story of the old woman appears in the context of instructions for practice. The commentary on the preliminary practices is also a form of doctrine—a text communicating what Buddhists ‘believe,’ you might say. But the practice is necessary to make that worldview *real* for an individual. If practicing them is necessary, they should have some effect on the practitioner; something should change. But in the commentary, we often see exemplars of the before and after, rather than the process.

The allusion to this well-known story might serve to resolve or at least point us in the direction of an interpretation of the narrator's final realization that his tooth is included with the relics in the stupa. In that case, the lesson conveyed in the allusion to the story would seem to be that if the prayers and practices of the people circumambulating the stupa are performed with faith, the origin of the teeth is irrelevant. The teeth in “Orgyan's Teeth,” though, are not the only supports of practice

the narrator is pondering. There is also the question of Orgyan himself. In the didactic story, there are two characters: the son who sees only the dog's tooth, and the mother who possesses the confident faith capable of receiving the Buddha's compassion that can transform that dog's tooth into a precious relic.

Pema Tseden's story imagines a version of the process that transforms an individual from a son disinterested in faith to someone more like the old woman. There is nothing new or modern about the necessity of that process, *per se*. It is built into the Buddhist path, which requires a shift in how a practitioner sees the world, regardless of what the competing epistemological or cosmological frameworks are. In this story, though, we see a complex example of how specific contexts pose their own challenges to the process of cultivating faith.

Unlike the old woman who seeks support for her practice of faith in the Buddha—distant, gone from the world—the narrator is wrestling with the possibility of faith in his friend.⁵⁰ The complication of this personal relationship is also not new to a traditional Tibetan Buddhist narrative that includes recognized reincarnated individuals. However, in the story, the narrator is not only puzzling through the implications of that tradition, but he is doing so in the wake of an untimely death, both of his friend and of who his friend has recently become.

⁵⁰ Thinking about the story of the old woman in light of *this* story, though, one wonders what effect the halo seen at her death had on her son.

Faith and Numbers

When the narrator visits him for the first time in private, Orgyan says that he has recently heard that someone had proven that $1+1=3$. He wants his friend, the one who could actually do the math homework in school, to explain this to him, but the narrator can only say that this is a profound problem beyond his comprehension. During a second visit, Orgyan tells his friend that their old math teacher came to ask him for a blessing, and he also asked her this question. Her reply was similar to the narrator's—how could a primary school math teacher comprehend such a thing?

Orgyan's preoccupation with this math equation is strange. Here is a young man who was never good at math, obsessed with a math problem that is not actually a math problem, but a way of talking about phenomena that do not behave in ways that adhere to arithmetic. From adding one drop of water to one bucket of water, to jingoistic corporate slogans about synergy, it can be applied in many contexts, but it cannot be proven. In a lighthearted reading of this story, the narrator and the math teacher are bemused, and the reader can be, too. The comic relief is really driven home the first time Orgyan asks this question, when he elaborates on how odd this seems to him by reciting the arithmetic he *does* know: " $1+1=2$; $2+2=4$; $3+3=6$ " and so forth. The narrator admits that he was worried Orgyan would keep counting up to a $100+100$, and he can only manage to say, "really fast," when Orgyan stops at $10+10=20$.⁵¹

⁵¹ *Enticement* 10.

If we take the meaning of this math problem seriously, one way to interpret its purpose is to contextualize it in relation to the two forces of intertextuality discussed above. Orgyan tells the narrator during both visits that he need not prostrate “between the the two of us.”⁵² The first time, the narrator feels uncomfortable with not prostrating, but he only offers white silk scarves. The second time he prostrates three times against Orgyan’s insistence that he need not do so.

In light of the math problem, the reader can take Orgyan’s insistence that there are only the two of them there more literally. The narrator is uncomfortable because there are glimpses of the old Orgyan the narrator grew up with, but Orgyan-the-tulku is there as well. In the narrative, he works on reconciling those two people as he shares bits of memories about young Orgyan, but he is still unsure. It is not only a question of whether Orgyan is endowed with extraordinary spiritual qualities but one of identity. Rather than indicating that no one else is there to see the narrator’s behavior, Orgyan is assuring him that there is really no difference between the narrator’s young classmate and the tulku before him. His inability to accept the math equation is an incredulity that a third person has somehow appeared between them.⁵³

⁵² *Enticement* 13. The first time the narrator visits Orgyan alone, he also says there is no need to prostrate “as there is no one else here but us two,” 9.

⁵³ On the one hand, this might seem to contradict the Buddhist doctrine of “no self,” one of the arguments for which is that a person changes over time. A young child is clearly different from the adult they become, and from all of the moments in between. In the context of the math problem, though, I take this reassurance as a warning against the reification of multiple entities, or conversely, a nod to the concept of emptiness. The point is similar to the metaphors used to explain Buddhature. They point out that the nature of enlightened mind is already within each person. Thus the Orgyan who cheats on his math homework is no different from the enlightened tulku Orgyan.

The signposts stating the “the main thing” punctuate both of the meetings. The main thing changes as the narrator’s view of Orgyan shifts and his faith in him grows. At the beginning of the story, when the main point is that Orgyan died at the age of twenty, the narrator explains that his parents and others chastise him for saying that Orgyan “died” rather than “passed away into nirvana.”⁵⁴

After his first private visit and the first instance of the math problem, the narrator repeats:

Orgyan separated from the world of humans when he was twenty years old. I, however, have lived in the world of humans past the age of twenty. I know it is not proper to say of Orgyan that he died, separating from the world of humans, but I can’t inwardly accustom myself to say of a friend of the same age that he “passed away into nirvana.” Still, this is not the main point. The main point is that now our ways have parted forever.”⁵⁵

He had begun to see another Orgyan—someone other than his friend who copied his homework in primary school, two Orgyans, as it were. He can acknowledge that, but the main thing, the loss he feels, is expressed as friends parting forever. The traditional religious narrative that, as a tulku, Orgyan has control over his movements in and out of the cycle of rebirth is not completely unbelievable to the narrator, but what feels real to him is that his friend is dead.

⁵⁴ *Enticement 5.*

⁵⁵ *Enticement 10.*

During their second private meeting, after remembering an example of Orgyan's unusual compassion, the narrator decides to ask Orgyan for blessings to alleviate some troubles in his life. At this point, he experiences "a spontaneous sense of faith" in Orgyan.⁵⁶ Despite this surge of spontaneous faith, in the final scene of the story, the narrator remembers losing his tooth at Orgyan's house and realizes that it is among the relics. The narrator does not tell us what he thinks about his tooth sitting amongst the sacred objects in the stupa. He does not interpret that realization for us—neither with an affirmative religious conviction nor a dismissive denial of belief in the blessings of relics.

The foregoing interpretation, that Orgyan's strange math problem plays with Buddhist teachings on the nature of the self and the Tibetan tulku institution, represents a "religious interpretative framework" that continues to speak in the same discursive space as interpretative frameworks that have accrued through modern education, media, and so forth, what Robin calls a "secularizing literary narrative corpus."⁵⁷ While this is not the confident voice that insists on a traditional narrative that *explains* the world conclusively through the perspective of religious doctrine, it is convincing as one depiction of what the process of cultivating faith might look like for an ordinary individual. There are moments of certainty, and moments of doubt, assurances, and questions.

⁵⁶ *Enticement* 11–12. The act of compassion he remembers happens at a place near the Machu River, where they used to play. Orgyan runs a very long way back to the river in order to save a big fish they found lying in the road, even though the narrator himself insisted they could sell it and it would die anyway. The fish is revived after Orgyan returns it to the water, and the narrator admits that Orgyan showed great compassion. He also remembers that the area by the river Orgyan favored playing in was a holy place associated with Padmasambhava.

⁵⁷ Robin, "Souls" 124–125.

The narrator is feeling drawn toward a traditional religious view sporadically, but he also represents what Robin describes as “the world and training of an emerging lay elite, one who does not totally discard a believer’s interpretation of events but offers other angles of interpretation.”⁵⁸ These two frameworks can exist alongside each other without one having to annihilate the other. They can even inform and inspire one another. The allusions to corrupt and ideal religious figures in the story do not carry the expository power one expects, but rather the circumstances of the narrator and his friend invite the reader to reimagine or adapt these references to make sense of their place in the story. This is a reminder that ‘a believer’s interpretation’ is not an immutable script. What may be called secularizing forces can also be occasions for religious narratives to adapt, as they often do in response to social change, or as its instigator.

The Mundane Experience of a Tulku in Contemporary Amdo

Though the above analysis addresses some aspects of the question, I am not satisfied that this interpretation of the math problem accounts for all that it accomplishes in the story. This reading primarily considers the narrator’s positionality in the relationship between the two men and takes Orgyan’s math question as a response to the narrator’s struggles with his friends’ new status and identity. In this context, the math problem is a skillful means that Orgyan knowingly uses to gently challenge or guide the narrator, and by extension, the author uses to affect or communicate to the reader. It serves more to

⁵⁸ Robin, “Souls” 124–125.

articulate the shape of the narrator's confusion than it does to illuminate Orgyan's state of mind.

The narrator's revelation of the truth about his baby tooth is not the only thread left to ponder at the end of the story. For one, Orgyan repeats his frustration with the nonsensical math problem. And secondly, the narrator conspicuously omits the circumstances of Orgyan's death at the beginning of the story and never returns to them.

The omission invites the reader to imagine scenarios of Orgyan's death at the age of twenty. The details of the story influence the possible causes of death that come to mind, but in imagining a particular possibility, the reader also re-assesses the significance of events and details in the story. I offer one such speculative thought experiment here in order to demonstrate the capacity this story has to work with traditional narratives while creating space for new subjectivities in them.

The conspicuous omission of otherwise relevant information suggests that the circumstances of Orgyan's death are a taboo topic, either in the world of the story or in the context of publication. When the narrator makes the last "main point," he corrects himself repeatedly, saying that the language he uses is not the point; the main point is that a stupa will be built, and Orgyan's teeth will be placed inside—no, that is not the main point either. "The important point (གཙོ་བོ་ནང་གི་གཙོ་བོ་)," he says, "is that they prepared to insert fifty-eight of Orgyan's teeth into the memorial stupa."⁵⁹

⁵⁹ *Enticement* 15.

This is the last important point the narrator stipulates, and it bookends the first, that Orgyan died at age twenty. The number fifty-eight is recognizable, in Amdo at least, as a reference to the year 1958, during which rebellions against Mao's collectivization policies resulted in massive trauma and loss of life in that region. It has become a symbol of resistance and tragedy in everyday life, as well as in fiction, music, and film.⁶⁰ In a story written by an author from Amdo and set near the Machu River, the connection between this number and death, particularly death in the course of resisting the state, is strong.

Contemplating a version of the story in which Orgyan's death resulted from involvement in resistance against the state, *as* a religious exemplar, expands the implications of many aspects of the story. For example, might his incredulity that someone could prove that $1+1=3$ reflect his frustration with propaganda? As a recognized tulku, the requirement to attend mandatory re-education programs and be subjected to a number of bureaucratic management processes would have been part of his new reality, along with the new religious training he would receive.⁶¹ I do not intend this suggestion to subvert, or even diminish, the

⁶⁰ A concise account of the events of 1958 in Amdo, including testimony from Tibetans' own words and references to longer first-person accounts, can be found in the section, "La révolte en Amdo en 1958" (45–56), authored by Françoise Robin, in the report to the French Senate: *L'histoire du Tibet du XVIIème au XXIème siècle, Rapport de groupe interparlementaire d'amitié 104*, edited by Katia Buffetrille and Françoise Robin. <https://www.senat.fr/ga/ga104/ga104.html>. Accessed April 20, 2024. Robin also addresses references to 1958 in creative genres in "Souls" (123) and "The Events of Amdo '58 and the Emergence of Literary Postmemory among Tibetans." See also Weiner (2021) for a history of the Chinese policies and political project affecting the region in the years leading up to the 1958 revolt, beginning in 1949.

⁶¹ Various "orders" giving the state power to manage and re-educate the residents of monasteries and nunneries have been passed since the early 2000s, including order no. 5, which regulates the reincarnation of individuals through an application process.

validity of reading the math problem as a way to contend with Tibetan Buddhist concepts of selfhood and identity. From Orgyan's perspective as a newly recognized tulku training in Buddhist education and receiving communist party re-education at the same time, these two interpretations convincingly address two different existential problems, one based on Buddhist teachings on the nature of the self, and the other raised by a clash between what Buddhist tradition described Orgyan's role as a Buddhist leader should be, and what state policy would allow it to be.

Beyond the math problem, when the narrator realizes his tooth is entombed with Orgyan's, does he feel honored or blessed by the association? In that case, the final realization about his tooth might be comforting. What might the miraculous stories about Orgyan and the continued devotion his followers have for him after his death say about the relationship between faith and acts of resistance? These are not questions that the story explicitly asks, much less answers. It *does* explicitly raise the issue of faith and devotion through the voice of a layperson who ambivalently reflects on a revered religious figure. And moreover, it situates that narrative within a process of grieving that is left open to contend with still more voices, even hostile ones that challenge the existence of traditional narratives, not just their plausibility. In effect, the story asks traditional narratives to accommodate new interpretive challenges, rather than pitting them against other interpretative frameworks.

Conclusions

“Orgyan’s Teeth” is so compelling in part because Pema Tseden does not make it easy, and this is not simply because he leaves the interpretation of an outcome up to the reader or populates the story with obscure references. There is no real plot to speak of in this short story, yet it is crowded with intertextual references and shifts temporally between memories with various emotional atmospheres. The story lets the confusion and disorientation of grief stand and does not obscure the inelegant, sometimes inadequate attempts at finding meaning that follow the death of a loved one, or a role model.

I offered a thought experiment in which Orgyan’s death involved him having to make sense of political resistance in relation to his religious role. While there are numerous examples of religious figures doing just that in Tibet’s recent history, a particularly intense series of protests, overwhelmingly performed by monks at the outset, was growing as this story was published. Beginning with a monk named Tapey, who set himself on fire at Kirti monastery in Ngawa on the third day of Losar, Feb 27, 2009, well over a hundred people self-immolated in protest by the end of 2014. The protests were covered extensively in international media, and the effect on Tibetan communities all over the world cannot be understated.⁶²

⁶² A series on the Society for Cultural Anthropology website includes a diverse selection of pieces by writers from a number of fields, including anthropologists, historians, journalists, art historians, as well as Tibetan intellectuals, examining many facets of this crisis from a variety of angles. It also includes a list of links to other websites with information about self-immolations, including news articles, opinion pieces, reports, and Chinese media. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/self-immolation-as-protest-in-tibet>. Accessed April 20, 2024.

I raise this subject here because the events provoked discussions about the religious implications of the protests among Buddhist leaders, as well as international journalists. Not limited to examinations of Buddhist doctrine and ethics, the interpretative force of narrative was also in question. On January 8, 2012, Lama Sobha was the first tulku to self-immolate, and he left an audio recording of his last statement to his fellow Tibetans. In it, he analogizes the intention of his action to the moment “the Buddha bravely gave his body to a hungry tigress.”⁶³

The reference here is to another story that appears in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, this time a jataka tale of one of the Buddha’s lives before his final birth and enlightenment.⁶⁴ He sacrifices himself to prevent the starving tigress and her cubs from incurring the negative karma of eating one another. The sacrifice in the story is a moving depiction of generosity, and the gift of food is immediately beneficial to the tigress and her young. The protests, though affirmed as a noble sacrifice by the Buddhist community, have garnered insufficient inattention from people and governments with the power to change the suffering at its root, which strains the narrative satisfaction of that analogy.⁶⁵

⁶³ In the English translation of this message, the translators inserted a clarification because the story is so familiar to Tibetans (and many Buddhists) that Lama Sobha needed only to use shorthand: “I am sacrificing my body with the firm conviction and a pure heart just as the Buddha bravely gave his body to a hungry tigress [to stop her from eating her cubs].”
<https://savetibet.org/harrowing-images-and-last-message-from-tibet-of-first-lama-to-self-immolate/>. Accessed April 20, 2024.

⁶⁴ As in Lama Sobha’s message, Patrul Rinpoche merely has to say “Examples are Prince Great Courage giving his body to a starving tigress, ...” in his commentary on the practice of cultivating the perfection of generosity (236).

⁶⁵ Tenzin Mingyur Paldron, in “Virtue and the Remaking of Suffering,” gives a nuanced reading

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PEMA TSEDEN, THE TRANSLATOR

Translating Tibet: Pema Tseden's Translations of Takbum Gyal's Works

Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani

Abstract: This essay constitutes an initial exploration into the pivotal role that Pema Tseden played as a translator to promote Tibetophone literature in China and beyond. Pema's translation of literature represented his initial foray into creative literary pursuits, prior to venturing into writing literary works and making films. Pema's translations, predominantly from Tibetan to Chinese, yielded three anthologies of stories from the Tibetan oral tradition known as the *Tales of the Golden Corpse*, as well as numerous translations of contemporary Tibetophone short stories that he has published for over thirty years in the most famous Chinese literary journals. His two Chinese-language anthologies of Takbum Gyal's stories brought his fellow Tibetophone writer much-deserved recognition in China.⁶⁶

Keywords: Pema Tseden, translation, Tibetophone literature, *Tales of the Golden Corpse*, Takbum Gyal

⁶⁶ An early form of this essay was presented at the *Symposium on Pema Tseden: Tibetan Writer, Filmmaker and Translator*, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, China (October 2014).

Pema Tseden's important contributions as a translator of Tibetophone literature in Chinese have been eclipsed by his tremendous success as a filmmaker and writer. However, literary translation was Pema's first form of engagement with storytelling.

The first literary work that Pema remembered translating from Tibetan to Chinese, just as an exercise and a pastime, was the oral *Tales of the Golden Corpse* (མི་རྩི་ཆེ་སྤྱང་།) to which he grew up listening.⁶⁷ This happened during the 1980s after he had graduated from the Tibetan Teacher's Training College (མི་རིགས་དགེ་ཐོན་སློབ་གྲྭ།) in Chabcha county (ཆབ་ཆེན་རྫོང་།). He somehow found time through the years to revise those old translations, translate even more stories, and successively publish three anthologies of the *Tales of the Golden Corpse* in 2009, 2014, and one posthumously in 2024. This effort unquestionably demonstrates Pema's unwavering dedication to making Tibetan literature accessible in languages beyond Tibetan.

Translation held great importance for Pema since his college years. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in Tibetan language and literature at Lanzhou's Northwest Nationalities University and working for a few years at a governmental office in his hometown, he decided to return to the same university to pursue a master's degree in Tibetan-Chinese translation. During his graduate studies, Pema engaged in translations from Chinese to Tibetan and Tibetan to Chinese but did not receive training to become a translator of literature per se, as most of the texts he translated in his classes were about "more

⁶⁷ Personal interview with Pema Tseden. 11 December 2011, New York.

practical subjects”.⁶⁸

As a translator, and as a writer, he acknowledged being influenced by the Chinese translations of foreign literature he began reading in the 1980s, among them Kafka, and García Márquez, and different literary styles and techniques such as surrealism, magic realism, and stream of consciousness. But when avidly reading these earlier Chinese translations of Western literature, Pema felt that some of them were rather stale. He came to the realization that many Chinese translators of the time did not understand literature, so they translated the plot, not its style. He concluded that bilingual writers like him were better suited for translating literature because they could grasp the literary beauty and the aesthetic value of a work. Never academically trained as a literary translator, Pema relied on his own knowledge of the Tibetan and Chinese languages and cultures besides his individual literary sensibility.⁶⁹

As one of the few truly bilingual Tibetan writers in China at the time, Pema was in a unique position to engage in literary translation. As a result of the Chinese government’s contradictory language policies and practices in Tibetan-populated areas, and the subsequent chaos of the Cultural Revolution, many Tibetans were unable to learn their native language at schools. Writers such as Ozer (Weise, འོ་ཟེ་ལྷོ་མེ་ལོ་) or Pema Nördron (Baima Nazhen, བཤམ་མོ་འོ་འོ་འོ་), educated in Sichuan, were raised in a Chinese academic environment with no access to a Tibetan

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

education, while writers like Pema Bhum (པེམ་བུམ་) and Dorje Tsering Chenaktsang (ཏོར་ཇེ་ཙེ་རིང་ཙམ་ཅན་ཀུན་ལྷན་པོ་) in Amdo Tibet were, by the special characteristics of their hometowns, able to benefit from excellent training in the Tibetan language. In this regard, Pema Tseden was very lucky to be educated in both languages; and conscious of this privilege, he has always used his bilingualism and biculturalism to build a bridge between the two cultures.

The call to translation is stronger in bilingual writers who grew up in colonial or postcolonial situations. Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré has written about what she calls the phenomenon of “cultural suicide,” the “irreparable loss” that happens when minority children are not able to learn the language of their parents at school, and due to societal pressures refuse to speak it at home. She believes it is her duty, being privileged by bilingualism, to try to alleviate this situation by translating her own works, and those of other Spanish-speaking writers so as to preserve the culture for that generation of Puerto Ricans that are not able to master their own language (Ferré, 2012).

Pema Tseden’s drive to translate stemmed from several factors. He desired to make Tibetophone literature available to Tibetans who could only read in Chinese and to the Chinese public at large, and he wished to see books on the market that moved away from fantasies that otherized Tibet, a point he made in many interviews :

I think Tibet has always been mythologized and worshipped and made more remote....People’s psychological expectations and experiences of Tibet are

stuck in the past. They don't understand the new Tibet.⁷⁰

His translations of Tibetophone literature gave a voice to his fellow Tibetophone writers so they could also share their own visions of this new Tibet.

Cultural Translation: Pema Tseden's Translations of His Own Stories

His bilingual writing process differs from that of the other few bilingual Tibetan writers in China. He says that he is comfortable writing his stories in Chinese or Tibetan languages if the stories deal with universal values. However, stories that are too related to the Tibetan way of thinking, or those dealing with a problem that directly affects the Tibetan people, which may be written with the idea of eliciting reflection on the part of the Tibetan reader, can only be written in Tibetan. He believes that a Han readership would not be interested in or benefit from these kinds of stories.⁷¹ Pema Tseden is not alone in this regard. The “certain things stay at home” approach was also pointed out during a series of interviews I conducted with Tibetophone writer Puntshog Tashi (པུན་ཤོག་ཐམས་པུ་ཤེས་པ།). His acclaimed series of comical sketches critical of alcoholism and other social maladies were directed to a Tibetan audience and so written in Tibetan, while the author has often chosen the Chinese language to write more general essays about Tibetan culture directed to a Chinese audience (Schiaffini, 64).

⁷⁰ Lim, Louisa. “Director Seeks To Capture Life In Modern Tibet.” *All Things Considered*, NPR, 30 June 2009, 10:50 AM ET.

⁷¹ Personal interview with Pema Tseden. 11 December 2011, New York.

In this regard, Pema Tseden, both as a writer and as a translator, first made a conscious choice in deciding whether or not the Chinese-language readers would be able to relate to a given story, this previous mental process being already a conceptual “translation” of Tibet even before starting the actual linguistic one. Even though he chose to translate only stories he believed Chinese audiences would be able to understand, he encountered challenges in deciding how to translate Tibetan customs, ways of life, or religious beliefs. In the case of translation of his own stories, he admitted he preferred to change the story slightly than resorting to explanatory footnotes, often so present in earlier Chinese translations of Tibetan texts.

Without lengthy cultural explanations, Pema Tseden embedded the meaning of Tibetan cultural objects or customs in the translation itself, by “subtly rubbing them into the specific details of the plot so as to create the desired atmosphere.”⁷² What characterized Pema Tseden’s translations from Tibetan into Chinese, as well as his own Chinese-language stories, was the subtlety by which he introduced Tibetan culture and ways of life in a way that seemed very natural. While his fellow Tibetan bilingual writer and translator, Tsedor, did not translate his own Tibetan language stories in the belief they would not be understood by the Chinese readers, Pema Tseden thought that all stories could be translated as long as the topic was appealing to the given audience. Consequently, the way in which both authors shared topics with both linguistic audiences was different as well. For example, Tsedor (ཆེན་པོ་) published two essays on Lhasa’s Barkor street, studied

⁷² Email correspondence with Pema Tseden. 10 August 2010.

by Lara Maconi. While the Tibetan one is more “intimate,” directed to those who are familiar with it, as if trying to “establish a sympathetic dialogue with the reader,” the Chinese version of the essay is explanatory and descriptive, aimed at informing the Chinese reader (Maconi, 2008). On the contrary, when Pema Tseden translated his Tibetophone stories into Chinese, he preferred to let the Chinese reader guess and make an effort in trying to understand the cultural background rather than burdening the reader with explanations and descriptions that would undoubtedly interrupt the natural literary flow of the piece. Coincidentally, this is also a characteristic present in Pema’s films. He did not want to ‘spoon-feed’ Tibet into Chinese mouths. He wanted his Chinese readers and audiences to adapt to his own portrayal of Tibet, even if this required a bit of work on their part to understand the cultural differences. This was most evident in his refusal to dub his films into Chinese.

Translating Others

Translation was for Pema yet another avenue of artistic creation. He was often drawn to authors who shared some of his aesthetic and stylistic choices, especially the translations he made of the works of Tibetan writer Takbum Gyal (Ch. Debenjia 德本加 ལྷུག་འབྲུག་རྒྱལ།) in the last decade.

Both in his writing and in the stories by Takbum Gyal’s that he translated, there was an abundance of quotidian dialogue that brought Tibetans closer to the Chinese readership. Françoise Robin pointed out this phenomenon in the case of the dialogues in *Silent Holy Stones* (Pema Tseden, 2006):

I believe that the great part played by dialogues aims at re-humanising Tibetans, showing them as fully-fledged humans interacting within their own, coherent society, rather than as voiceless, dependent, semi-silent, subaltern, wild, half-human creatures—what they appear in the case of an unequal relationship between an ‘alien’ filmmaker and ‘native’ actors (Robin, 2008).

Some of the most interesting dialogues reflect changing values, mistrust, or misunderstandings. One of the first instances that come to mind is a scene in *Silent Holy Stones* when a Tibetan child summarizes the usefulness of his school subjects like this: “when you study math you can be an accountant, and when you study Chinese, you can live in the big city.” However, when asked what you can do when you study Tibetan, he replies “I don’t know.” In Pema’s translated stories we can see similar instances of that same cultural dislocation. In his translation of Takbum Gyal’s story “A Misty Sunset” there is a funny short dialogue in which the Sinicized Tibetan protagonist, a writer, is mistaken as a Chinese by an old Tibetan storyteller he has befriended in the mountains.

Another topic of interest in Pema’s movies, especially in *The Search* (Pema Tseden, 2009), also appears in his translation of “A Misty Sunset”: the juxtaposition of urban and rural worlds when modern, educated Tibetans search for authenticity in rural Tibet. The Tibetan writer protagonist of “A Misty Sunset”—the one the locals mistake for Chinese—often travels to some remote Tibetan mountains to look for literary inspiration, infatuated with the mountain’s beauty and “primitivism.” The urban Tibetan writer retreats to the mountains to

see a Tibet he thinks has not changed in thousands of years Borrowing Louisa Schein's term, we could call this attitude "internal orientalism" (Schein, 1997).

For obvious reasons, Pema Tsenden did not openly address political or sensitive ethnic topics, but his movies and some of his novels point to those changing values and tensions in Tibetan society. As a translator, however, Pema did not shy away from stories that reflected on ethnic discrimination or implicitly criticized Han Chinese. Earlier in Pema's translation career, he translated "Long Live Room 218!" a short story written by Lhasa-based Sinophone Tibetan writer Tonga and published in the journal *Literature of Tibet* in 1984. This is one of the very few stories Pema translated from Chinese into Tibetan in the 1990s. Although the story ends in a positive ethnic reconciliatory tone, which Tonga told me was required by the journal,⁷³ it is full of humiliating instances in which Han students refer to Tibetans as backward and patronize or humiliate their Tibetan classmate (Tonga, 1984).

In 2010 Pema translated Takbum Gyal's highly political satire "The Story of How I Adopted the Pekingese Dog," which was originally published by Takbum Gyal in the Tibetophone journal *Light Rain* (ལྷ་ཁ་ཆར།) in 2006.⁷⁴

⁷³ Personal interview with Tonga. Lhasa, 20 October 1999.

⁷⁴ Pema's Chinese translation was published first in the website Tibetcul, and later on reproduced in the anthologies of Takbum Gyal's stories that Pema published. The full translated story can be found here: <https://www.tibetcul.com/wx/zuopin/xs/27642.html>. This story, as well as all of Takbum Gyal's stories mentioned in this essay can be found in both of anthologies of Takbum Gyal's that Pema published in Chinese in 2012 and 2017 (see bibliography).

It is the tale of a treacherous Pekingese dog who takes advantage of his human Tibetan co-workers and receives promotions as a result of his manipulative tactics. Besides the obvious ethnic reading of the Pekingese dog representing Han Chinese and the Tibetan mastiff symbolizing Tibetans, this story directly denounces how the CCP and power itself have corrupted Tibetan officials. For example, the Tibetan County Head Commissioner in the story drinks imported liquor, smokes expensive cigarettes, and ends up killing his Tibetan mastiff. After killing the Tibetan mastiff, the Tibetan County Head Commissioner feasts on it over dinner with his new friend, the opportunistic Pekingese dog. The story's ending powerfully reinforces the ethnic tension: the Tibetan narrator, still horrified at the scene of the commissioner and the Pekingese dog eating the meat of the Tibetan mastiff, leaves the house of the commissioner and realizes in shock that the city is full of Pekingese dogs:

Listening to the recurring barking of so many Pekingese dogs in this dark corner of the city, not illuminated by streetlights, I cannot help but think about the Tibetan mastiffs, in the deep twilight of a night at a remote village, risking their lives fighting against the jackals.⁷⁵

Pema was attracted to Takbum Gyal's stories because of their multilayered meanings; stories that you need to read several times in

⁷⁵ Ibid. Interestingly, the word that Pema chooses to translate "wolf", the usual enemies of Tibetan mastiffs when they defend the livestock, is 豺狼 which can both mean the animal (a jackal or a wolf) but also an evil person or a vicious tyrant.

order to unearth the myriad of allusions contained in them.⁷⁶ “A Misty Sunset” could be simply the story of the friendship between an urban educated Tibetan writer and an old Tibetan storyteller from the mountains. Yet, the writer gains fame because he is retelling in writing the stories told by the old man, without giving him any public credit. Not coincidentally, this fictional Tibetan author’s most acclaimed story titled “The Soul Tied to a *Khata*” resembles closely the title of the most famous short story by the real Sinophone Tibetan writer Tashi Dawa (བཞུ་ཤིས་རྒྱ་བ།), “The Soul Tied to a Leather Rope (Tashi Dawa, 1986).” The story includes an implicit comparison of the fictional character with the real Tashi Dawa (A.K.A. Zhang Niansheng), a controversial figure for some educated Tibetans who doubted his Tibetanness on the grounds of his mixed Han-Tibetan heritage, his Chinese upbringing and his lack of knowledge of the Tibetan language. “A Misty Sunset” could be a cautionary tale to Tibetan intellectuals reminding them of how much of their Tibetan identity has been already lost in their urban Sinicized life (Takbum Gyal, 2012, 2017). The old Tibetan storyteller, who does not have a name, appears in Takbum Gyal’s story and in Pema’s translation as a vindication of the “otherized,” anonymous Tibetans whose stories satisfy our thirst for the exotic.

As a translator of Takbum Gyal’s stories, Pema seemed to be most drawn to cyclical plots, with repetitive, almost rhythmic grammatical structures, and reiterated messages, which coincidentally are also characteristics of his stories and films.

⁷⁶ Interview with Pema Tsenden. 14 June 2018, Beijing.

One of the examples is Takbum Gyal's "The Dream of Three Generations," subdivided into ten stories, all of them repeating the same expression 阿嘖嘖, the Chinese transliteration of the sound of clicking the tongue. "A Misty Sunset" starts with the mention of how famous the writer's short story has become and ends with the short story receiving a prize. "A Misty Sunset" uses the repetition of a single event—the recollection of how the old storyteller saved the life of the writer once (two paragraphs repeated word by word) as a divisor in between the different trips made by the writer to the mountains. In other words, the repetition of that paragraph or event serves to remind us of the importance of the old storyteller in the life of the writer, but also as a time marker to signal to the reader that what comes afterward belongs to a different time, another visit by the writer to the same place. "The Story of How I Adopted the Pekingese Dog" is in itself a repetition of different instances in which the dog manipulates his coworkers and the leaders to climb up the power ladder. The dog's behavior is portrayed over and over in similar terms—how he licks the shoes of the leaders to clean them, how he presents them with gifts, how he flatters them. The overstating of these details adds a certain humor to the story, while reinforcing the story's critique.

Cyclical plots, as well as repetition of actions, words, and grammatical structures are clear features of Pema's Chinese language stories. Many examples of this come to mind. In "Enticement," every time the protagonist opens the sacred scriptures the attraction that he feels is described with the exact same adjectives over and over again (Pema Tsenden, 2018). The comings and goings of lambs and clouds thorough the story "Eight Sheep," the frequent miscommunications between the Tibetan boy shepherd and the foreigner, and the repetition

of actions by the young shepherd, namely playing with the little lambs and eating his dry meat are but a few examples (Pema Tseden, 2018). This rhythmic repetition can be also seen in some of his Tibetan-language stories, especially so in “Doctor,” in which the cyclical story and the dialogue repetitions are taken to the extreme in the manner of the theater of the absurd (Pema Tseden, 2018).

Coincidentally, the overstating of concepts and the repetition of shots can also be seen in Pema’s movies. Dan Sallitt’s analysis of Pema Tseden’s films accounts for repetitions as well, some examples being *The Search*, with its tendency to “circulat[e] the same stories through different media, as well as the same reactions through different characters,” or the repetition of shots in “Old Dog” in what Sallitt sees as Pema’s conscious decision to “underline its repetitive aspects instead of minimizing them” to achieve sometimes a sense of comedy, and sometimes a distancing effect (Sallitt, 2014).

As a result of translating so many stories by Takbum Gyal in the last decade, Pema’s approach to translation underwent some changes. While during the 1980s and 1990s, he preferred to translate stories he liked by different writers and publish them in Chinese literary journals, he decided later on to focus on one author at the time. Pema believed that concentrating on translating several stories by a given author to be published in book format would be more helpful in letting the work of Tibetophone authors be known and recognized.⁷⁷ Pema enjoyed concentrating on translating Takbum Gyal’s stories for long periods of

⁷⁷ Interview with Pema Tseden. 14 June 2018, Beijing.

time, and I am sure he would have agreed with García Márquez that translation is the deepest kind of reading. A focus on Takbum Gyal's stories for several years allowed him to internalize his Tibetan language style, in order to better render it into Chinese.

Fruit of these translations was also a collaborative script, and the last time I interviewed Pema in person in the summer of 2018, he mentioned his desire to make some of Takbum Gyal's stories into scripts for future films. On that occasion, Pema also told me of another exciting translation project: not satisfied with having published already two anthologies of translations of Takbum Gyal's short stories, he wanted to publish a third book just devoted to Takbum Gyal's dog stories. Pema had already publicly volunteered to do this in the course of an interview he conducted with Takbum Gyal in January 2016 (see picture and accompanying note).



Takbum Gyal and Pema Tseden, 2016⁷⁸

⁷⁸ This picture illustrated Pema Tseden's interview of Takbum Gyal conducted in January 2016. It was originally published in *Qinghai Lake* but immediately circulated in WeChat and was also

Pema's untimely passing did not allow him to realize these projects, but the success of his translations finally gave Takbum Gyal the recognition he deserved in China, which has translated into awards, invitations to participate in literary conferences, an international trip, as well as membership of the Chinese Writers' Association.

Conclusion

Translation theorist Douglas Robinson questions the premise of translators being merely "borrowed bodies" for the writing of writers. As a translator himself, Robinson affirms:

My imagination has to be hard at work when I translate, too; and since I am choosing the target-language words, everything I write has to be filtered through my experience, my interpretations.⁷⁹

Pema carefully chose to translate the Tibetan works that resonated with the Tibet he wanted to portray. By choosing these works we may say he was not only translating Tibet for a Chinese audience but 'writing Tibet' through his translations.

posted in Tibet Web Digest. Two years later, the interview was published in English in High Peaks Pure Earth: <https://highpeakspureearth.com/pema-tsedon-interviews-takbum-gyal-in-my-previous-life-i-may-have-been-a-dog/>

⁷⁹ Robinson, Douglas. *Who Translates: Translator Subjectivities Beyond Reason*. Albany, New York: State University of New York, 2001, p.3.



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PEMA TSEDEN, THE FILMMAKER I

Remembering Pema Tseden as a Filmmaker

Chris Berry

Abstract: This essay counters the frequent assessment that *Old Dog* and *Tharlo* mark the high point of Pema Tseden's filmic career. Instead, it argues that his later films, such as *Jinpa* and *Balloon*, mark the beginnings of a second phase. Whereas his first phase emphasized social realism, journey films, and male protagonists, his second phase is characterized by the expression of character interiority through dreams, imagination sequences, memories and so forth, blurring the lines between reality and the imagined. Pema's early films countered both Hollywood and Chinese exotic images of Tibet with a quotidian modernizing Tibet from the Tibetan perspective. His later films convey the inner lives of Tibetans, and not just Tibetan men, but also Tibetan women.

Keywords: Pema Tseden, Amdo, cinematic career, new image of Tibet, inner worlds, female roles

As I write this in September 2023, several months have passed since I woke up one morning to the terrible news about the sudden death of Pema Tseden (པད་མ་ཚེ་བརྟན།, known in Chinese as 万玛才旦) at the age of only 53. I still cannot quite believe it. He performed the seemingly impossible feat of being loved and admired by Tibetans,

Chinese—including the Chinese authorities—and cinephiles the world over. His talents went beyond cinema. He was also known for his prolific output of short stories and novellas in both Chinese and Tibetan. But in this brief tribute, I want to focus on his films, because that is the area of his work that I am most familiar with. As is widely known, he was the first Tibetan filmmaker to work consistently inside the People's Republic of China, the first Tibetan graduate in directing from the famous Beijing Film Academy and the first PRC filmmaker to make films predominantly in the Tibetan language.

In the wake of Pema's death, I heard various conversations about his oeuvre. More than once, people expressed the belief that *Old Dog* (ཁྱི་གནམ།; 老狗, 2011) and *Tharlo* (རཱ་ལོ།; 塔洛, 2015) were his greatest works. At first, I agreed. But then, as I thought things over, I began to form a slightly different understanding. I have come to think that *Old Dog* and *Tharlo* indeed marked the culmination of the first phase of his aesthetic career. However, I have also come to believe that *Jinpa* (ལག་དམར།; 撞死了一只羊, 2018) and *Balloon* (དབུགས་མཁོ།; 气球, 2019) launched a new and equally exciting second phase. It is this argument that I will try to begin developing here. Sadly, if my argument holds up, it only underlines the magnitude of our loss.

So, what are these two phases that I am perceiving in Pema's film career? The first phase was marked by a realist impulse. When asked about why he wanted to make films, Pema often expressed a dissatisfaction with existing images of Tibet. Pema was born in 1969 into a herder's family in Guide County, Qinghai Province, which is outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region but part of the larger Tibetan cultural area and known in Tibetan as Amdo. He did not recognize his

Amdo in either the Shangri-la fantasies of Hollywood or the feudal theocracy of Mao-era Chinese films. The films of the first phase of his screen career are marked by the inscription of a different screen image of Tibet's physical and social space, with different motifs. This is an Amdo at once Tibetan and modernizing.

The films that I am arguing mark a second phase in Pema's career, *Jinpa* and *Balloon*, strike the viewer as different from his earlier realist work immediately, because both feature scenes of interior memory and imagination. One could say that with these films he launched a project of exploring the internal Tibetan world just as his earlier films explored the external world. Furthermore, his early films are, as I have argued elsewhere, road movies in which male characters traverse contemporary Tibet as though surveying their patrimony. Although he had already begun to create larger roles for women, in *Jinpa* and *Balloon*, female characters are as important as men.⁸⁰ Furthermore, not only do they have more significant speaking roles, but they are also among the characters whose subjective vision we share. Now let me try to flesh this argument out a bit more.

All of Pema's films are set in everyday and modern or

⁸⁰ Since writing this tribute, I have had a chance to see *Snow Leopard*. It does not continue the development of women characters or give us access to their interiority. The only female character is a quiet and subservient wife. However, what it does do is give us access to the interiority and visions of the snow leopard itself. So, while not as diverse in its gendered roles as *Jinpa* and *Balloon*, the film continues Pema's new emphasis on interiority and diversifies his range of characters out from the human world to other sentient beings. For my review of the film, see *Snow Leopard* (Pema Tseden, 2023): Beyond the Human-Animal Divide," <https://www.unicornscreening.com/media-and-blogs/snow-leopard-pema-tseden-2023-beyond-the-human-animal-divide>. 20 January 2023. [Shelly, I do not know if this should go into Works cited? I have not put it there]

contemporary Amdo settings. Chinese characters are few and far between. Examples include the man who wants to buy the Tibetan mastiff in *Old Dog*—ironically, played by a Tibetan actor—or the balloon seller at the end of *Balloon*. As well as all the main characters, all the figures who embody officialdom, such as the policemen in *Tharlo* and the doctors helping to enforce birth control policies in *Balloon*, are also Tibetans. Of course, depicting interactions between Chinese and Tibetans in detail and in a way that would be convincingly realistic and at the same time pass censorship in the PRC would be very difficult; the topic of relationships among the ethnic groups in China is very sensitive. However, when challenged at public events about the absence of Chinese in his films as not reflecting the reality of the Tibetan world today, I have heard Pema respond variously that his films are set in areas where Chinese migrants are rarely found and that precisely when they take place is not clear, meaning that the stories might predate the influx of ethnic Chinese. Whatever the reasons, their absence marks his films as representations of Tibet and contemporary Tibetan life and culture.

Pema's Tibet is far removed from the either denigrating or idealist exoticism he disliked so much in both other films made in China and foreign films. Instead of depictions of either nightmarish serfdom or Shangri-la mysticism, his Tibet is a contemporary environment marked by the steady arrival of modernity and frictions between it and established practices, including the religious customs of everyday life. In *The Silent Holy Stones* (ལྷིང་འཇགས་གྲི་མ་ཐེ་རྫོ་འབུམ།; 静静的嘛呢石, 2005), the mani stones stand in sharp contrast to the *Monkey King* VCD set that the little monk values so highly. In *The Search* (འཛོལ།; 寻找智美更登, 2009), the Drimé Kunden tale that the director wants to

stage a performance of is an ancient cultural text, but he drives around in an SUV to find the right actors. In *Old Dog*, the Tibetan mastiff is valued as a farm dog and almost part of the family by the father, but it is also valued as a fashionable commodity on the pet market. In *Tharlo*, the contrasts between the mountain life of the shepherd and the city life that leads to his ruin are clearly staged as a contrast between the old and the new. This focus on the vicissitudes and contradictions of modernization continues in what I am calling the second phase of his cinematic career. The eponymous Jinpa is a truck driver concerned about the soul of a sheep he accidentally runs over. *Balloon* intersects condoms and birth control with sky burials and reincarnation.

In all the films, travelling across the Tibetan landscape is an important narrative trope. However, they all also avoid the kind of swooping drone shots of the mountains that communicate otherworldly qualities in orientalizing films about Tibet. Instead, the protagonists travel by motorbike, truck, SUV, or whatever other vehicle makes sense, and the films are mostly shot from their point of view, immersing us in their daily experience rather than communicating some transcendent perspective by dwarfing them in the landscape. The shape of the journey tends to be circular, as in *The Search*, or back-and-forth, as in *The Silent Holy Stones*, *Old Dog*, and *Tharlo*. In this way, the films in the first phase map a lived territory that can perhaps also be understood as a patrimony, given that these protagonists are male. In the case of the back-and-forth movements, they mark an oscillation and a tension between older lifestyles and more modern ones: the monastery and the home with the television set in *The Silent Holy Stones*, the farm and the city in *Old Dog*, and the mountain pasture for the sheep and the town in *Tharlo*. In process, Pema inscribes a new image of Tibet.

If this first realist phase observes external and visible Tibet, his second phase begins exploring the inner worlds of Tibetans. This occurs first in *Jinpa*. The first half of the film is still in the realist mode. Jinpa is a truckdriver, so, in a sense this is another road movie. But after some opening shots that place the truck on the road in a windy and rainy landscape, we find ourselves in the cab of the truck listening to *O Sole Mio* with Jinpa, taking us into his headspace. When he picks up a hitchhiker, our focus is on the interactions between the two of them. This occurs on the same day Jinpa has accidentally run over a sheep, and when he gathers the hitchhiker is on the way to seek revenge for his father's murder, the possibility of a second death troubles him.

After he has dropped off the hitchhiker, consulted a lama about the soul of the sheep and spent the night with an old lover, Jinpa sets out to find the hitchhiker, who turns out to also be called Jinpa. Arriving at a tavern where Jinpa the hitchhiker was the day before, Jinpa the truck driver asks the innkeeper to tell him what happened. When she does so, a sort of flashback begins. But it is complicated by the presence in the flashback of the current customers of the inn. It becomes difficult to know whose memory we are watching, and whether it is the past or the past and present jumbled up. The boundaries between individual beings become as blurred as those between past and present, and between the two Jinpas.

Furthermore, the woman innkeeper initiates and anchors the flashback. Indeed, she is also part of blurred identities, so that it encompasses not only the two Jinpas but her as well. In the second half of the film, she is as significant as the two men who dominate the first half. And her triangulation of the situation inscribes a distanced,

perhaps questioning, perspective on the two men that suggests the position of the filmmaker and encourages us into a similar stance. Her role amplifies those of women in Pema's earlier films. Audience members had noticed that in his early films, women were onlookers or, as in the case of the actress who travels around with the men in the SUV in *The Search*, silent. When quizzed about this gender imbalance in public events, I often heard Pema give a pragmatic answer: historically, acting had not been seen as a respectable activity for Tibetan women and there was a shortage of Tibetan actresses who could take on speaking roles.

However, even in *The Search*, the actress's role is significant. Not only is her refusal to perform unless they can help her find her former boyfriend the trigger for the whole journey, but also her position as silent observer anchors the camerawork and helps us to observe the men in the car with some distance, even skepticism. By the time he made *Tharlo*, Pema had found a professional actor, Yangshik Tso to take on his first significant female speaking role. She had appeared previously in a minor role in *The Silent Holy Stones*, developed a singing career, and started acting in between. In *Tharlo*, she takes on the role of the barber Yangtso, who is also the femme fatale who leads Tharlo into ruin. Again, the film achieves a greater level of nuance and complication by anchoring a number of shots of *Tharlo* in the town with her perspective, encouraging us to distance ourselves from Tharlo a bit, even if it is unlikely that we align ourselves with her or identify with her, especially given what happens in the rest of the narrative.

The innkeeper's role in *Jinpa* continues Pema's transition from films with male protagonists to films with groups of protagonists,

including women. But it is *Balloon* that takes this tendency even further. The critical responses to *Jinpa* were mixed, especially to the second part. Perhaps because it was not what audiences had come to expect from Pema, many expressed both surprise and confusion. But I believe that *Balloon* builds on the new foundations that Pema had begun with *Jinpa*. It increases the number of significant speaking female roles to three, creates an ensemble cast of characters of both genders, narrates the story from multiple perspectives, and dives deeper into the intersubjective and subjective world of these characters with sequences that render their interiority through dreams, flashbacks, and other visions that communicate their emotional experience.

Balloon focuses on a Tibetan family that already has three boys, in accordance with the birth control policy that allowed minority ethnicities to have more than one child. However, they are not permitted a fourth. The title refers to the condoms that are part of their effort to prevent pregnancy, but which their youngest children mistake for toy balloons and keep stealing from under the pillow. The same actor who played the truck driver Jinpa in *Jinpa* (incidentally going by the name of Jinpa in real life) appears again as the husband in *Balloon*, Dargye. The three female roles are his wife, Drolkar, played by Sonam Wangmo, who played the innkeeper in *Jinpa*, her sister, played by Yangshik Tso from *Tharlo*, and her family planning doctor, played by Kangchen Tsering.



Actor Jinpa (left), Sonam Wangmo (right) rehearsing her lines in *Balloon*, under the guidance of language instructor Loden (middle), August 2018 @Françoise Robin

Where the wife tended to be silent and housebound in Pema's earliest films, in *Balloon*, Drolkar is making journeys on a motorbike back and forth between the farm and the town where the family planning clinic is. But, as in *Jinpa*, we do not spend so much time on the journey or focusing on the landscape and surroundings. Inevitably, Drolkar does get pregnant. Her husband is eager to keep the baby, thinking it must be the reincarnation of his recently deceased father. Drolkar is more pragmatic, knowing that they cannot afford the fines that would follow.

Dargye the husband has the one sustained interior vision in the film. This occurs after his father dies and on the dawn journey to cremate him—rather than the 'sky burial' with vultures so beloved of films that exoticize Tibet. Blurry reflections in puddles and eerie music

in the half-light capture someone walking upside down. Could it be his father's soul departing? When the camera lifts from the puddle and the figure is upright, it turns out to be Dargye's oldest son, Jamyang. This seeming rational explanation is undermined when Jamyang calls out after "grandfather."

However, it is Drolkar who invokes the interior world twice. First, she tells her husband about an odd dream she has concerning a barren ewe and the ram they borrowed to impregnate the ewes in their flock. This resonates strangely with her own situation. Second comes a blurry sequence, all in one long take, with her sister coming up behind her. It seems Drolkar is looking at her own reflection in a window, and panning round to say goodbye to her sister, who says she is dedicated to religion as she leaves. Although we never learn the details, it seems the sister has had a disastrous affair with a schoolteacher and author. Is this Drolkar's memory of her sister's first departure, or her departure now after her return visit?

Without giving away too many plot spoilers, the film traces a series of complicated interactions between the cold rationality of government policy and the moral obligations of Tibetan culture, communicated through the inner thoughts and imaginations of the characters. This is embodied most noticeably in the possibility that the fetus in Drolkar's womb could be the reincarnation of Dargye's father. With the parallel strands of the sister's story, the sons and the balloon-condoms, and the sheep that does not get pregnant, the film is an at turns humorous and deadly serious depiction of the lived emotions, imagination, and personal crises of contemporary Tibetan people as they grapple with modernity.

In retrospect, *Balloon* may be more multi-layered and nuanced than any other film Pema Tseden made. This achievement indicates that far from being a mistake or an aberration, *Jinpa* and *Balloon* had opened a new pathway towards a second career peak that Pema was well embarked on at the time of his tragic death. He had already completed one more film, *The Snow Leopard* (གསལ་མེད་; 雪豹, 2023) which we now eagerly await, more aware than ever that he had so much more to give us when his time was so cruelly cut short.

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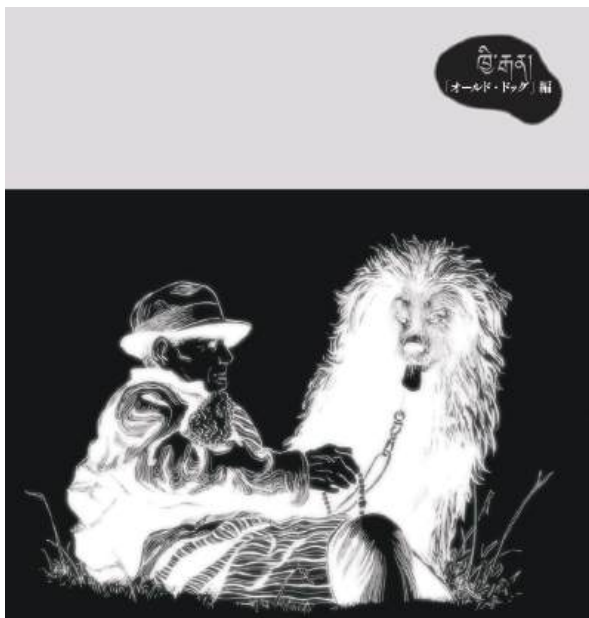
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Two Red Balloons: Pema Tseden and His Subjective Truths

Jamyang Phuntsok



A scene from *Old Dog*, illustration by Kuranishi ©Sernya magazine

Abstract: This prose essay highlights Pema Tseden's indispensable contribution to Tibetan cinema by foregrounding his films against the traditional depiction of Tibet in Western and Chinese imaginations. This is followed by brief thematic and formal analysis of his films.

Keywords: Tibetan cinema, subjective truth, Shangri-la, Hollywood, Chinese media, Pema Tseden

Some years ago, I interviewed an elderly Tibetan *ama-la* about her flight into exile for a documentary film. Through her responses, I got a general sense of the suffering people of her generation had endured. But when I tried to probe deeper for a more personal account, she became reticent. As a Tibetan, *ama-la*'s reluctance to talk about her personal suffering didn't surprise me. Putting others in the forefront and oneself in the background is considered good manners in our society. But what I was looking for in that documentary was a more personal, subjective truth rather than a general one, which is the case for most artistic creations. Through this perspective of subjective truth in art, I talk about the films of Pema Tseden in this essay.

One can say we Tibetans are a people victimized by history. And now we carry the heavy burden of telling the world our truth. It is a 'burden,' but we generally call it our duty. To this noble motivation, I want to raise some complications. It is important that in response to the Chinese distortion and revision of history, we must put our version of history forward or what we call in Tibetan 'spreading and raising awareness about the Tibetan cause'. Our cause is what we have worked on for years and are still working on. But art is not information, much less propaganda. Between the Chinese propaganda and our spreading of awareness is perhaps the neglected and somewhat lost voice of our artistic truth. Picking up this frail thread, I discuss the films of Pema Tseden.

Even though Tibetan cinema is relatively new, Tibet itself

is not completely new to the world of cinema. In broad terms, there existed the ‘Shangri-La’ Tibet in the West’s imagination and then the ‘feudal and barbaric’ Tibet as portrayed by our Chinese colonizers. Tibet as a Shangri-La can be seen in Hollywood movies as early as 1937 in *Lost Horizon* right down to 1997 in *Seven Years in Tibet*. The Chinese depictions of Tibet can vary from the early and downright propagandistic and film *Serfs* in 1963 to the more recent and romanticized *Kekexili* in 2004. Depicting the land and the people of Tibet with varying assumptions and accuracies, Western and Chinese films have continued to use well-known tropes and narratives to project breathless romanticism or pernicious propaganda.

What is the result of such projections? To answer concisely, the exaggerated projections of Tibet in films result in the loss of humanity of Tibetans. Instead of realistic portrayals, we are dealt with tiresome stereotypes or offensive caricatures. And because of the dominance of the western and Chinese media (Hollywood is far more pervasive), their ideas and tropes have influenced ordinary Tibetans as well as films made by Tibetans, who feel compelled to engage with these tropes to dismantle non-Tibetan ideas of Tibetan identity and sometimes, non-critically, internalise and perpetuate them as well. Keeping these points in mind, one can arrive at a critical assessment of Tibetan cinema. A filmmaker’s job is not to be the spokesperson of an establishment. They are also not in the business of disseminating information or correcting the ills of society. A personal truth, its search or envisioning—this is the starting of any artistic endeavour.

I have watched Pema Tseden’s early film *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005) on YouTube many times. Despite the subtitles in Chinese

and my scant grasp of the Amdo dialect, the film remains one of my favourites among Pema's works. There is something endearingly personal about the film and the gentle rhythm of life it depicts. It is a Tibetan film that is unapologetically itself and not trying to be something or tell something *to the world*. To me, this was very refreshing. By framing the story around a young monk's Losar (Tibetan for New Year) break at home—that is, a duration of time—Pema taps into the heart of what sets the art of cinema apart.

Then we come to *Old Dog* (2011), which I consider his best work. The film has a deceptive simplicity about its story and telling which is countered by its depth of meaning and scope for interpretation. The central conflict is established early on and gradually brought to a gut-wrenching, tragic resolution. It is impossible for any Tibetan to escape the deep emotional resonance this film brings about.

Tharlo (2015), *Jinpa* (2018), and *Balloon* (2019) are Pema Tseden's later works.⁸¹ In their themes, tones, and worldview, they are distinct from his early works. In *Tharlo* and *Balloon*, there is a sinister presence of an invisible antagonist which is the Chinese government. Although there are hardly any Chinese in his films, the forces of rapid change they have brought under the name of development and modernization are very much present. In the subtext of Pema's films, they are like the tentacle roots of a big tree. Pema's protagonists, like the eponymous Tharlo or Drolkar of *Balloon*, are tragic, solitary figures standing at the fault lines of these forced-upon tectonic shifts.

⁸¹ Of Pema Tseden's last two films, *Snow Leopard* (2023) has been screened in festivals while *Stranger* (forthcoming) is in post-production stage.

Thus, the world that emerges from these films is torn between the old and the new. Pema's sympathy obviously lies with the people who face this divide but their fate in his prognosis is a bleak one. This is a personal vision that I believe Pema arrived at in the course of his artistic career. Yet, in the final scene of *Balloon*, we see two red balloons flying up into the deep blue sky. I couldn't help but feel a tinge of wonder and optimism at this image. Perhaps this magical-realist twist was the start of a new artistic theme in his works.

Let us now look at some of the formal elements of his works. Two things that immediately strike us are his scant use of close-up shots and the slow editing. The deliberate distance that he maintains in his shots definitely corresponds to a distance the audience comes to keep with his characters. This distance complements his characters who are never verbose and always have a certain opacity about them. Pema is not the one to take us inside his characters' heads. This choice in framing his shots could also have been necessitated by the practical problem of having to work with largely non-professional actors.

In terms of editing his films, Pema Tseden is slow and sparse, sometimes deliberately so. To someone used to the fast-paced editing of commercial cinema, some of his long takes might be tedious to watch. But his stylistic choice is also an important aspect of his visual storytelling. Fast editing serves us a spectacle or a foregone conclusion on a platter whereas Pema's slow cinema extends an invitation. It requires us to accept and actively participate in his film. Let us look at an example: in *Old Dog* (spoilers ahead), the screen time between the old man refusing to sell the dog and his final desperate act of killing the animal is six minutes. Most of this duration consists of a single, silent scene of the man sitting and

smoking his pipe. The number of shots in these six minutes is six, making his shot a minute long on average. Now, the average shot length in films these days is about 2-3 seconds. So, why does Pema linger so long on his shots? More importantly, what effect does it have on the audience? I think this extended duration allows us to come to the realization of what the old man *might* be thinking about doing. This realization, the emotional response it evokes in us, is less from some visual spectacle than the time Pema allows for it through his editing.

Another effect of his slow editing and long takes is to allow time for something, which wasn't apparent initially, to emerge gradually. This emergent quality is not just a feature of his visual style but also his stories. In *Old Dog*, we initially think Gonpo is the protagonist, but it is his father who turns out to be the case. Similarly, in *Balloon*, we start with Dargye only to realize that it is his wife Drolkar who is at the film's center.

Thus, in both their form and content, Pema's films show a Tibetan artist from Tibet's artistic, aesthetic vision and philosophy. I am sure that in his characters and the world that they inhabit and face, many Tibetans would finally recognize themselves and appreciate the value of artistic truth. And by that very fact, his works also attain a universal value. One might call this the second coming of Tibetan cinema. With these thoughts, I remember the indelible legacy of Pema Tseden.

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Tibet in Vision: In Memory of a Master Filmmaker—the Late Pema Tseden

Tashi Nyima

Abstract: This paper examines the significant impact of indigenous Tibetan filmmaker Pema Tseden within the context of contemporary media culture in the People's Republic of China. As an emblematic figure for his nuanced portrayal of Tibetan life and its implicit political stances in his films, Tseden's oeuvre has garnered substantial academic attention. This analysis delves into the diverse academic interpretations of Tseden's films, which range from viewing his work as a counter-narrative to the prevailing Sino-centric discourse to reflections of the existing state discourse. This paper intends to contribute to the discussion by incorporating personal insights gained from a rare direct encounter with Tseden, coupled with an in-depth review of his early short stories. By exploring his bilingual literary foundation and its influence on his cinematic projects, this study argues that Tseden's initial literary works were instrumental in shaping his filmmaking career, providing him with a unique platform to project authentic Tibetan narratives to a broader audience. Additionally, this paper highlights specific films directed by Tseden, analyzing their uniqueness and innovation, thereby underscoring his substantial contributions to Tibetan cinema. Through this multifaceted approach, the paper seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of Tseden's artistic legacy.

and its cultural and political resonances.

Keywords: Tibetan films, contemporary Tibetan regions, cultural tradition, modernist development and inward-exploration

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the Tibetan cinematic world has witnessed a significant increase in film production, improvements in technology, and greater Tibetan participation. Unlike many films about Tibet and Tibetans made by outsiders, including those produced by Chinese filmmakers, a rising generation of home-grown Tibetan filmmakers has successfully entered the mainstream cinematic scene within China and beyond (Hladikova 2016). These filmmakers, who are proficient in both Tibetan and Chinese, are redefining the Tibetan cinematic landscape. This shift in the Tibetan film industry has attracted interest and enthusiasm from both the general public and academia, from both within and outside China, in the form of publications, symposiums, and film festivals.

One of the leading stars in this new wave of Tibetan film production, to which this paper is dedicated, is the late Pema Tsenden, who received numerous international and domestic awards for his films. He traveled widely across the world to attend film festivals, award ceremonies, and screenings of his feature films. Although academic studies of Tsenden and his films are not large in number, they have analyzed his work extensively in terms of life in contemporary Tibet, socio-cultural change, ethnic identity, political control, and, above all, self-representation (see Robin 2008; Frangville 2016; Yau

2016; Hladikova 2016; Pecic 2023; Zhong 2023). In this regard, his films have been categorized under various labels including Tibetan Buddhist films and Chinese minority nationality films as well as seen in the same category as American road movies and European minor cinema. Also, the intellectual inspiration for Pema's films has been traced back to Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, Latin American magic realism, and the Root Seekers Movement (chin. *xungenpai*) in China (Zhong 2023).

Pema Tseden's intellectual endeavors prior to his career as a filmmaker have been however understudied, especially considering the numerous fictions he published before embarking on his filmmaking career. The objective of this article is not to study Tseden's films per se but to take a closer look at his earlier works of fiction and how they have played a critical role in shaping his later career as a filmmaker. The overarching questions, in this regard, are how and to what extent his fiction has defined the intellectual framework of his films. In a nutshell, this paper intends to explore his writings in relation to his films. In doing so, it hopes to achieve a better understanding of the late Pema Tseden as a filmmaker, writer, and above all, as a human being, as a tribute in honor on his first death anniversary. This will hopefully contribute to the general discussion and debate on the changing dynamics of contemporary Tibetan cinema.

The death of Pema Tseden in May 2023 in Lhasa sent shockwaves around the world. I first heard about his passing through Chinese social media WeChat on the day he died. A few days later, friends and fans carried his body around Barkhor in an open public outpouring of grief, loss, and admiration for his remarkable

contributions to the Tibetan cinematic world. For many, myself included, it was difficult to immediately digest the news of his sudden death at such a young age, especially with no public record of previous illness whatsoever. Initially, many of us, including his friends and fans in his WeChat circle, were skeptical about the credibility of the news and treated it as potential fake news. However, as the news about his death spread and was shared across Chinese social media, including among his own friends, only then did I begin to believe its authenticity. Pema Tseden and I were friends on WeChat, where he shared, among other things, his public engagements and film-related activities. As his WeChat friend, I also followed his professional movements. The loss of Pema Tseden represents a tremendous blow to Tibet and the Tibetan cinematic world.

First Encounter with Pema Tseden

The first time I met Pema Tseden was in Paris in 2019 during the Fifteenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, where his feature film *Old Dog* (ཁྱི་གློ་བུ།) was screened to an audience of approximately 450 seminar participants from around the world, primarily scholars and students of Tibetan Studies. A few years earlier, I had watched some of Tseden's films during a film festival in Oslo, where I met one of his closest colleagues. I had a lengthy conversation with this colleague about Tibetan films and Tseden's own works in particular. Back in Paris in 2019, after the screening of *Old Dog*, he was invited for a Q&A session. I immediately took the opportunity to express my admiration for his work, along with a question about the motifs and plot of *Old Dog* which later became the subject of our interaction. Coming from a background in development

studies, I was drawn to the symbolism and the storyline of *Old Dog*, which, in my opinion, reflects a Tibetan experience of top-down state development in the region.

Those few words of praise I conveyed to him, both in front of that large gathering and afterward in our conversation, have given me a measure of comfort since the tragic news of his death. As we continued our conversation about *Old Dog* while walking from the event hall, I discovered that he was a man of few words, which made me feel a bit awkward in leading the conversation. He was a man of integrity, sincerity, kindness, contemplation, and above all, true to his profession with a strong sense of mission. The first impression he left had, in fact, deepened my curiosity about his works. It was only after watching more of his films and reading most of his fiction that I was able to reconstruct a fuller image of the late Pema Tseden as a human being, author, and Tibetan filmmaker, better than when I first met him in Paris.

The Journey of a Writer: Pema Tseden

Pema Tseden was born in 1969 in Amdo Trika (ཁྲི་ཀ), Guide County of Tsolho (མཚོ་ལྷོ) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai province. He received his primary and junior middle school education in both Chinese and Tibetan languages and later attended a prefecture-level teachers' training (middle) school. During this period, the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution lingered, and the post-Mao reforms liberalizing minority education and languages had not yet begun. In 1979, ten years after his birth, minority language and cultural education finally began to breathe, and in his third year of primary school, he had

the opportunity to study Tibetan formally. Prior to that, his education was conducted solely in Chinese (see Zhong 2023).

Pema Tseden's home village endured significant social disruption due to the construction of a hydropower station. This upheaval altered the social fabric, introducing supermarkets, bathhouses, and other urban features, and profoundly impacted young Tseden. According to him, adapting to this transformed environment was challenging for the villagers (Zhong 2023). Yet, it was during this time that he had the opportunity to watch films in the assembly hall of the construction site. Following the completion of the project, the departure of the construction workers left a void in the community. Culturally and educationally, apart from studying Tibetan in the third grade, Tseden's appreciation for Tibetan culture and Buddhism stemmed largely from his grandfather, who believed he was the reincarnation of his uncle. Under his grandfather's guidance, he studied Tibetan and Buddhism more deeply.

In the early 1990s, after completing his teacher training, Pema Tseden worked as a teacher in his home county for four years before enrolling at Northwest Nationality University (Lanzhou) to study Tibetan literature. His journey as a writer began earnestly while he was a teacher but took a more serious turn during his studies at the university. In 2002, he received a scholarship to study at Beijing Film Academy, becoming the first Tibetan to do so.

The decade before becoming a filmmaker, Pema Tseden had already established himself as a passionate and prolific fiction writer and a Chinese-Tibetan translator. He published numerous short stories

in both Tibetan and Chinese, many of which later became films. In his 2014 Chinese-language essay titled “My Writing Journey,” Tseden conveyed the sanctity he felt towards writing: “For me, writing is a noble act. It is like a Buddha sitting deep in your heart. The sincere words you write are a supreme offering to the Buddha within. Such words reflect not only your heart but also illuminate the hearts of others... they allow you to face life calmly, even years later” (Wanma Caidan 2014).⁸²

In public interviews, when asked to choose between filmmaking and fiction writing, Pema consistently expressed a preference for writing, citing the freedom and fewer concerns it offered him. Nevertheless, he recognized the powerful medium of film to reach a broader audience, which led him to embark on a filmmaking career. Over a decade later, his careers as both a filmmaker and a writer have successfully complemented each other. Films like *Tharlo* (ཐར་ལོ།) and *Balloon* (རྟ་པོ།) were scripted directly from his stories, often with little or no cinematic modification. Plans were also underway to adapt more of his short stories, including “Hard Candies (水果硬糖),” “Invited Guest Actor (特邀演员),” and “A Golden Ear (一只金耳朵),” into films. While Pema Tseden is internationally renowned primarily for his films, it is clear that his novels are the foundational source of his cinematic achievements.

The Birth of a New Wave of Tibetan Films

Leading scholars of Tibetan cinema, including Robert

⁸² All translations from Tibetan or Chinese are by the author.

Barnett, Robin Francoise, and Kamila Hladikova, have argued that the cinematic representation of Tibet has been mythologized both in domestic media within China and in global mass media. A widely recognized consensus among scholars is that Pema Tseden has pioneered a new era of Tibet-themed films within the People's Republic of China (PRC) that can truly be classified as 'Tibetan films.' This genre, as opposed to merely Tibet-related films, encompasses productions primarily created by Tibetan crews including the writer, director, and production team.

Unlike earlier Tibet-related films where Tibetans were often passive subjects, Tseden's films have transformed this dynamic, bringing Tibetans as proactive agents and not just passive objects of cinematic representation. Robert Barnett (2002) distinguishes between Tibet-related films—made chiefly by non-Tibetans for primarily non-Tibetan audiences using Chinese production crews—and Tibetan films aimed predominantly at Tibetan audiences. Pema's works clearly fall into this latter category.

Pema Tseden's films are defined by two core features: the use of the Tibetan language and keen socio-cultural insights into contemporary Tibetan life within the PRC. The Tibetan language plays a central role; it is employed authentically, reflecting everyday conversations and remaining largely uninfluenced by cinematic staging. This has contributed to the realistic and grounded portrayal of rural Tibetan life, especially at a time when Mandarin increasingly dominates public spaces and educational institutions in Tibet. The second defining feature of Tseden's films is his socio-cultural insight into the life-worlds of contemporary Tibetans, explored deeply through

both his films and his fiction. Although scholarly discussion, apart from work by some notable figures mentioned above, has primarily centered around his filmography, these interpretations—ranging from Robin’s “Performing Compassion” to Frangville’s “Minor Movement”—recognize Pema’s films as conscious endeavors to counter both the dominant hegemonic narratives within China and mythic Western perceptions of Tibet. These films are seen as vehicles for Tibetan self-representation as a direct response to these discursive currents.

However, while Pema’s films do represent Tibetan life based on his fiction, I argue that his primary intent is to delve into contemporary Tibetan identity and experience from an inward perspective rather than to engage outwardly in representation. Here, self-representation serves more as an inevitable outcome rather than the initial point of departure. Furthermore, in the age of social media and digitalization, the urgency for cinematic self-representation has diminished, as individuals now possess the technology to share their own narratives and representation widely.

Thus, Pema’s films and fiction can be seen as part of a larger project to critique not only the state’s top-down social engineering but also to challenge socio-cultural norms and understandings within Tibetan society itself. This exploration, deeply embedded in his stories and narratives, investigates the cultural geography of the human mind, revealing a complex web of individual, ethnic, and human identities and experiences. It invites a reflexive consideration of self in a dynamically intertwined world.

Fictions Built on ‘Real’ Stories

The majority of the stories and characters in Pema Tseden’s fiction are based on either his own lived experiences or those of people in his region. Growing up and later working as a teacher in his native home provided him with a profound insight into contemporary Tibetan society and self within the PRC. His transition from writing fiction in Tibetan, and later in Chinese, to filmmaking seems less coincidental and more like a systematic contemplation of choices and personal sacrifices. His studies in Lanzhou and Beijing offered him a professional distance from his native home, enabling a reflective and professional look back.

Pema Tseden’s fiction tackles complex and multifaceted themes, including intergenerational conflict, the state of traditional culture, impermanence, modernity, displacement, rebirth, cause and effect, dignity, and kindness. By integrating traditional Tibetan folktale elements with modern cinematic storytelling techniques, Tseden has established himself as a sophisticated storyteller. Capturing the cultural geography of the human mind and emotions on film is challenging due to the intrinsic complexity of these elements, but through his use of elaborate literary devices in his fiction, Tseden presents a more authentic and comprehensive portrayal of these aspects than can often be achieved through the medium of film.

Pema Tseden himself has said that the main motifs of his works are to present an objective and authentic portrayal of contemporary Tibetan life within the PRC. In the preface of one of his fictional works, he writes “I long to tell the story of my hometown in my own way ...

a more authentic hometown that has been blown by the wind.” (Tseden 2019). Most of his films are shot in rural Amdo and feature stories of Tibetans from various walks of life. Unlike his films, his works of fiction—except for a few place names and regional language details—do not specifically denote any particular part of Tibet and could represent the lives of Tibetans from regions outside of Amdo.

The thematic correlation between his fiction and films is strong, even for films directly based on his stories. The foundation of many film storylines was laid in his fiction writing years, if not decades, before their cinematic releases. While his films often incorporate dramatization through twists and plot turns, it is his works of fiction that lay the intellectual groundwork, offering a more detailed and unconstrained exploration of themes. During an interview, Tseden mentioned that he finds fiction writing to be a more sincere and uncompromised act than filmmaking, indicating his natural preference for literature over cinema.

While Pema Tseden’s films have brought him broader recognition, it is his works of fiction that form the core of his oeuvre, offering creative, realistic, and imaginative reflections of contemporary Tibetan life. Both his fiction and films subtly approach socio-cultural, political, and ecological issues, carefully navigating the complex terrains of censorship and socio-cultural constraints. This strategic choice has allowed him to gain significant publicity without encountering serious hurdles.

In his fictional works, Pema employs simple and accessible language, whether in Tibetan or Chinese, with uncomplicated plots and

literary devices. This strategy helps depict the authentic life-worlds of his characters, ensuring that readers can engage with the cultural geography of contemporary Tibetans without getting lost in complex language.

His stories, though deeply rooted in the specific socio-cultural context of contemporary Tibet, resonate beyond cultural, regional, and national boundaries, universally exploring fundamental aspects of human nature and relationships. His masterful integration of traditional storytelling with modern cinematic narration techniques often includes multiple stories within a single narrative, reflecting the complex dimensions of contemporary Tibetan life. Additionally, the use of contrast—whether between generations, modernity and tradition, right and wrong, or among characters—is a notable literary device in his works.

Juxtaposing Modernity and Tradition: The Journey from Fiction to Films

At the heart of Pema Tseden's work is his meticulous character development and plot construction. In an interview (Tseden 2018: 222), he mentioned that the genesis of his characters often starts with a hint of their existence in real life, which he then enriches with his personal observations and experiences. His characters are uniquely crafted, often placed in diverse circumstances that reveal various facets of Tibetan identity. This deliberate characterization aims to explore the multiplicity of Tibetan selves across different contexts. For example, in *The Silent Holy Stones* (ལྷིང་འཇགས་ཀྱི་མ་ཉེན་འབྲུག་), the main character, a young monk, exhibits an unusual fixation with the Chinese TV soap

opera *Journey to the West*, a beloved series in China and Tibet since the 1980s. The film subtly breaks from traditional presumptions about monks, showing this protagonist as someone who, contrary to expected sanctity, is captivated by popular media and capable of lying. This nuanced portrayal underscores the clash between perception and reality, a recurring theme in Pema's works.

Similarly, the story of an old *mani* stone-carver is in contrast with his son, who after receiving a modern education chooses not to return home to continue the family craft. This narrative thread explores the tensions between traditional crafts and contemporary aspirations, highlighting generational divides and the impact of modern education.

The journey of the young monk from monastic life to his home village for the New Year celebration serves as a lens through which to view the encroachment of modernity on a remote community, reflecting broader socio-cultural shifts. However, the story presents a nuanced view of modern development, suggesting that the community's response is not wholly adverse but involves a dynamic process of negotiation and reinterpretation among its members.

In contrast, *Old Dog* portrays the darker consequences of modern development. The film tells the story of a father and son who are forced to confront their differing attitudes towards a Tibetan mastiff, traditionally a symbol of loyalty and dignity. Under the relentless pressure of a market-driven economy, the father takes a drastic step to end the mastiff's life, a metaphor for the erosion of traditional values under modern neoliberal forces.

This narrative not only reflects the theme of ‘a dying tradition’ prevalent in many of his fictional works but also vividly depicts the tensions between pastoral traditions and urban market forces. The intergenerational conflict and the stark choices faced by the protagonists—between adhering to traditional values or succumbing to market demands—highlight the complex dilemmas that confront Tibetans. The story culminates in the tragic decision by the father to kill the mastiff, an act to preserve the animal’s dignity, rather than allowing his son to sell it to a Chinese dealer for a substantial sum.

By moving between these narratives, Pema Tseden skillfully bridges his literary groundwork in fiction with his cinematic expressions, maintaining a profound dialogue on cultural integrity, identity, and change within the Tibetan context. Through both mediums, Tseden continues to offer insightful, often poignant reflections on the intersection of tradition and modernity in contemporary Tibetan life.

Exploring Contemporary Tibetan Self

Pema Tseden situates his characters and plots within a realm of struggle or contention, using these tensions to delve into the complexities of human relationships against a backdrop of cultural change and impermanence. His narratives frequently explore the friction between internal desires and external pressures from cultural changes, state authority, and neoliberal market forces. This reflective process in his work raises more questions than answers, notably through open-ended narratives that prompt profound contemplation about Tibetan culture and modern societal dynamics in China.

Tharlo's Experience of Modernity

In both *Tharlo* (ཐར་ལོ།) the film and “Tharlo” the short story, the protagonist is a rural herder, emblematic of contemporary Tibetans caught at the crossroads of time and conflicting ideologies. An orphan with minimal formal education, Tharlo is proficient in reciting Mao's citations, reflecting the deep ideological imprint of his schooling, reminiscent of traditional monastic memorization techniques. This character highlights the stark reality for many Tibetans who navigate a life suspended between traditional rural upbringing and the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution.

As he steps into the post-Mao era, Tharlo becomes a stranger in his own land, grappling with profound socio-cultural, economic, and political shifts. His story escalates as he encounters betrayal by a Tibetan hairdresser, which metaphorically and literally strips him of his identity, pushing him to question his place within this rapidly transforming society. Despite the consistency in storyline between the fiction and its film adaptation, the narrative in the fiction offers a deeper, more comprehensive portrayal of Tharlo's internal and external conflicts.

In discussing the beginnings of both the fiction and film adaptations related to Tharlo, it becomes evident that much of the fundamental background information from the fiction is omitted in the film (Tseden 2018: 298). The opening of the fiction unfolds as follows:

Tharlo usually braids his hair, which hangs down the back of his head, making him quite eye-catching. Eventually,

people started calling him ‘Little Braid,’ and even forgot his real name. At the start of the year, the township police station visited the village for ID card renewals and held a meeting with the villagers. The police chief called out ‘Tharlo’ repeatedly but received no response. Perplexed, he asked the village head, ‘Is there no one named Tharlo in your village?’ The village head laughed and replied, ‘Ah, police chief, everyone here only knows him as ‘Little Braid.’ That’s Tharlo!’ ...Finally realizing the confusion, the police chief called out for ‘Little Braid,’ and Tharlo, unaware that he was being called by his real name earlier, promptly stood up and acknowledged himself. ...(Tseden 2018: 298)

In the fiction, the opening describes Tharlo in detail, offering history and setting and a sense of atmosphere. The background information about Tharlo’s hair and ID card renewal serves as crucial elements that provide the plot with a starting point for better interpretations. On the other hand, the film begins with Tharlo uttering Mao’s famous speech called “Serve the People” in a state of perplexity and confusion. However, he successfully translated the short story “Tharlo” into a visually striking film using black-and-white imagery and a restrained composition. This visual adaptation intensified the theme of loneliness and the protagonist’s existential crisis, adding depth to the narrative.

Thematic Exploration in “I Ran Over a Sheep”

“I Ran Over a Sheep” (撞死了一只羊) is a first-person short

story where “I” accidentally kills a sheep while delivering goods and then embarks on a series of eccentric actions to alleviate guilt. The sense of absurdity in the story emanates from “I”’s unconventional reactions to the situation. Rather than fleeing or abandoning the dead sheep, “I” takes it to a temple for help, followed by arranging a sky burial with a beggar’s assistance. The narrative concludes with “I” buying half a mutton and heading to his lover, Dolma. Overall, the novel traverses a symbolic landscape where ethical dilemmas, spiritual redemption, and the consequences of moral compromise converge, underpinning a thought-provoking exploration of personal values, guilt, and the quest for inner peace. The film version introduces significant modifications, including subplots that enrich the narrative tapestry.

The fiction remains inward-looking, focusing on the protagonist-cum-narrator’s psychological and spiritual turmoil following an accident. This narrative examines themes of life, death, guilt, and redemption within the framework of Buddhist beliefs, which dictate the protagonist’s actions to secure a proper ritual for a deceased sheep, juxtaposing religious practices against his subsequent mundane actions that counter his earlier spiritual endeavors. The film *Jinpa*, adapted partly from that short story, omits much of the context of the story prior to the opening of the film, which includes the protagonist’s inner conflict, beliefs, as well as sense of frustration after the collision. The following excerpt captures this state of mind of the protagonist, in the short story:

After I sat down, I saw the guru in the photo staring at me again. His serious look made me feel guilty. I quickly lowered my head, put my hands together, and said, “You

saw it too, I hit the sheep to death, but I didn't do it on purpose." When I looked up, the guru in the photo still had the same expression. I complained in my heart, "You didn't remind me, hitting a sheep to death made me accumulate sins." The guru in the photo seemed to have a more serious expression. I was a little at a loss. I looked back at the dead sheep on the back seat. The dead sheep lay peacefully, motionless. I looked back at the guru, and his expression seemed to have changed, no longer so stern. Now I relaxed a little, shifted the gear, and started the car (Tseden 2019: 367).

The excerpt delves into the protagonist's internal turmoil and interaction with the guru (spiritual teacher) in the photo after an unfortunate incident of colliding with and killing a sheep. The protagonist's immediate response to the guru's serious gaze is guilt, compelled to confess the accidental death of the sheep and seek acknowledgment and absolution for their unintended actions. The internal dialogue reflects a sense of moral responsibility and remorse, as the protagonist's interactions with the guru symbolize a journey of inner redemption and moral reckoning. The shift in the guru's expression mirrors the protagonist's evolving emotional state, signifying a moment of internal reconciliation and acceptance towards resolution and inner peace.

Conflict and Dilemma in Balloon

Balloon (རྟ་ལྔ་མཆོད་པོ།) is a fiction turned film that revolves around a family of seven facing unexpected challenges and choices. The story

involves themes of reincarnation, family dynamics, religious beliefs, and the struggle between spiritual and worldly desires. The narrative explores complex relationships within the family, including the protagonist's wife considering abortion, the eldest son grappling with his identity, and the younger sister's contemplation of her life as a nun. The film uses symbolism, dream sequences, and visual techniques to present a thought-provoking narrative that delves into the intersection of tradition, belief, and modernity. The narrative centers on a couple, Dargye and Drolkar, facing severe familial and societal dilemmas. Forced to choose between the birth of a fourth child and the harsh penalties from state-enforced birth policies, they epitomize the acute conflicts between traditional beliefs and governmental dictates. Like his other works, Pema Tsenden uses their story to underscore the erosion of cultural norms and the tough choices Tibetan families must navigate within challenging contemporary socio-economic circumstances as well as the State's restrictive frameworks.

Cultural Preservation in Grassland

Grassland (རྩྭ་མང) is a film that depicts a simple yet powerful story of the same title by Pema Tsenden. The narrative follows mother Tsomo (མཚོ་མོ།), a septuagenarian nomad, as she embarks on a journey across the grassland with the village chief to find the thief who stole her yak. The film explores themes of trust, honor, and cultural values unique to the grassland environment. Through the characters' actions and interactions, the film subtly conveys the essence and complexities of life on the grassland. *Grassland* has garnered recognition and awards both locally and internationally for its portrayal of human relationships against the backdrop of the vast and captivating Tibetan landscape.

Tsomo has become a poignant symbol of cultural persistence and transformation. Her reaction to the theft of her liberated yak reflects deeper values of forgiveness and merit, conflicting sharply with community pressures and modern moral decay. Tseden uses this narrative to critique the erosion of Tibetan values, illustrating through vivid contrast the generational and ethical shifts impacting contemporary Tibetan society. Like the previous films discussed, the fictional version gives readers a more comprehensive narrative picture than the film, including a better picture of what mother Tsomo believes and wants concerning the theft of her “liberated” yak (ཆེ་བཟོ།). The following excerpt captures Tsomo’s attitude:

I am concerned about the yak thief. If the yak thief were to be arrested, he would be punished, and if he were to be punished, would not all my merits accumulated as a result of yak liberation be lost?... I do not want the [stolen] yak [back]. Let’s go back home (Tseden 2016: 8)

Mother Tsomo is concerned about the potential consequences of the yak thief being arrested and, as a result, is reluctant to go with Tsedrug (ཆེ་འབྲུག།) to pursue the matter any further. This excerpt from the fiction highlights Mother Tsomo’s compassionate perspective towards the yak thief, rooted in her belief in cause and effect and the accumulation of merits. This portrayal of her reluctance to pursue the matter further due to concerns about the consequences of the thief’s arrest sheds light on her compassionate nature and deep understanding of the interconnectedness of actions and their repercussions. It is a poignant moment that delves into themes of forgiveness, empathy, and the complexities of moral decision-making.

Conclusion: A Luminary in Tibetan Cinema

As a pivotal figure in the burgeoning wave of Tibetan films in China, the late Pema Tsenden has made indelible contributions to the cinematic landscape. His works are distinguished by three key characteristics: the use of authentic, everyday Tibetan language; profound self-exploration and insight into contemporary Tibetan life-worlds; and an unembellished, grounded portrayal of life in modern Tibet. These distinctive elements stem from his upbringing and education in the Amdo region, as well as his formative years as a writer and a teacher. In essence, Pema has masterfully integrated his lived experiences and observations of contemporary Tibetan life with his dual roles as a fiction writer and filmmaker. His works of fiction particularly provide foundational texts from which his film manuscripts and storytelling styles are developed.

Pema Tsenden's fictional works offer an inward-looking exploration of the cultural geography of Tibetan life-worlds, reflecting multiple facets of contemporary Tibetan existence both superficially and in subtle depth. This suggests his lived experiences and extensive research into everyday life and the embedded socio-cultural rationales of the region. More than a mere reflection of Tibetan beliefs, his stories delve into the intellectual and emotional basis of Tibetan Buddhist beliefs, resonating with themes of impermanence, spiritual wisdom, karma, and kindness. Pema's engagement with Buddhist texts in his spare time has evidently enriched his worldviews, marking a Buddhist influence that, while profound, is not as widely acknowledged compared to other inspirations such as magic realism and contemporary cinematic currents. Unlike other magical realism

narratives in contemporary China, which often critique religious beliefs as superstitions or relics of backwardness, Tseden's stories celebrate Tibetan Buddhism for nurturing positive human qualities like kindness, honesty, and compassion. These virtues are typically embodied in his older characters, reinforcing his recurring theme of a fading traditional culture at odds with the values of the younger generation.

Pema Tseden does not blindly adhere to traditional cultural norms. Instead, he employs satire in his fiction to critique irrational aspects of traditional practices. His narratives also critically address the social changes instigated by neoliberal market policies and state-driven modernist development, which he views as culprits in the erosion of traditional Tibetan culture, whether it concerns stone carving or the performance of traditional Tibetan opera.

Exploring the contemporary plight of Tibetans and their cultural traditions under the current socio-political and economic conditions, Pema Tseden's works present a nuanced view of Tibetan culture as both endangered and enduring. His fictions dualistically portray the decline of traditional cultural institutions and the pervasive, albeit dwindling, influence of cultural practices among the young. Through his nuanced characters and their inherent virtues of kindness, Tseden imbues his stories with a sense of resilience and empowerment, enabling them to navigate and withstand a landscape marred by disappearance and despair. Through his profound contribution to literature and film, Pema Tseden has not only chronicled the transformation of Tibetan culture but has also fostered a greater understanding and appreciation of its enduring spirit and complexity.

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Pema Tseden, A Tibetan Spiritual Artist at the Confluence of Eastern and Western Cinema⁸³

Xu Feng (Translated from Chinese by Wei Duan⁸⁴)

Abstract: The historical research of the French Annales School provides a suitable method for studying Pema Tseden's films. His art emerges from the *longue durée* historical structure and cultural context of Tibet within China, becoming part of the second wave of Eastern cinema's influence on Western cinema. His work profoundly reflects Tibetan cultural traditions and modernity, portraying human tragedy in an intensely materialistic society while seeking to preserve the essence of Tibetan practices in the modern world. Pema Tseden's style has evolved from richly documentary realism to Spiritual Realism. Inspired by filmmakers like Kenji Mizogushi, Pema Tseden developed a film language rooted in Spiritual Realism, using his understanding of suffering (Tibetan and Sanskrit: *dukkha*) as a guiding path in his exploration of happiness and truth.

⁸³ The author of this article wishes to thank Jigme Trinley (འཛིགས་མེད་འབྲིན་ལས།), Lung Rinchen (ལུང་རིན་ཆེན།), Wangchuk Tseten (WangxiuiCaidan དབང་ཕྱུག་ཆེ་བརྟན།), Dukar Tserang (Dege Cairang, གདུགས་དཀར་ཆེ་མེད།), Dondrup Tserang (Dongzhu Cailang, དོན་གྲུབ་ཆེ་མེད།), Zhao Miao, Li Yinian, Jiang Haolun, and Li Zisen for their wholehearted assistance.

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Keywords: Annales school, Tibetan regions, oriental cinema, modernity, Spiritual Realism, Suffering (*dukkha*)

“The perspective of the Holy Father” (Braudel, 1986, p. 7) was used by the French Annales historian Fernand Braudel to describe his concept of *longue durée* history. This exceedingly slow and nearly static historical perspective is “the history of the relationship between humans and their surrounding environment,”⁸⁵ (Braudel, 1998, p. 416) largely dictated by geographical and climatic conditions. In this *longue durée* history, change is almost synonymous with cycles of changes, because the characteristics of the natural world and the practices of human civilization continue to coalesce in a heterogeneous symbiosis. Over thousands of years (or more), the *longue durée* history has formed the cultural framework ingrained in the deep levels, and in collective unconsciousness (often manifested as ethnic unconsciousness). The framework is reflected in all humanistic phenomena, including food culture, linguistic systems, modes of production, political practices, religious beliefs, and norms of daily life, etc. Therefore, this essay defines *longue durée* history as the history of “geography, climate and humanities,” with the latter functioning as a linkage between *longue durée* history and social/event history. Social history examines the overarching fate and general trends of human communities, focusing on the socio-institutional conditions over decades. In contrast, event history concentrates on describing historical events with significant consequences and far-reaching influence during shorter periods. These events “may be well-known events that have gained consensus, or

⁸⁵ All the translations from French to Chinese have been done by the author.

they may be seemingly small but illustrative historical occurrences.” They can all bring evidence, illuminating a certain corner of history, and sometimes even illuminating a broad and deep scene of history. The references to Fernand Braudel’s *longue durée* historiography and tripartite history writing are not so much a methodological endeavor but a perspective through which to study Pema Tseden’s literary and cinematic texts as well as the new wave of Tibetan cinemas.

The Tripartite History of Tibet and Pema Tseden’s Texts

In the *longue durée* historiographical sense, Pema Tseden’s films lead us to the unique and internally diverse Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Starting from the short film *Silent Holy Stones*, he frequently returns to his hometown Tsolho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province. Among them, the films *The Silent Holy Stones* and *Tharlo* were filmed in his birthplace, Guide County.

The Tibetan name for Guide is Trika. Tibetan writer and scholar Lung Rinchen explains to me the Tibetan name for Guide as follows: “One interpretation is that the Buddhist king Tri Ralpachan (802-838) came to Trika to give teachings, and a throne was built for him (Tibetan: tri). Guide is the place where the throne is located. In another explanation, it may mean ‘by the river’ or ‘by the water.’”⁸⁶ These two possible etymologies of the place name, one linked to its geographical features and the other narrating a historical event, suggest its cultural heritage spanning millennia.

⁸⁶ Lung Rinchen. Correspondence with Xu Feng on October 10, 2023.

In the vast Tibetan regions, Trika stands out as areas an area with a relatively low average altitude (the county seat is only at an elevation of 2,200 meters, approximately 1.37 miles), a mild climate, abundant water resources, and rich agricultural produce. It is renowned for the saying, “The Yellow River in Guide is the clearest under heaven,” and is often referred to as the “Plateau’s Little Jiangnan.”⁸⁷ While animal husbandry is the mainstay on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the existence of agricultural, semi-agricultural, and semi-pastoral areas is common. But regions like Guide, known for wheat production, are rare. The clear Yellow River flows through the village of Dzong in Lazewa township, where Pema Tseden grew up. In this place, there is an extensive cultivation of spring wheat, a staple food, and corn, used for livestock feed. And the mountain grasslands serve as ideal grazing grounds. Guide is like a small warm haven nestled in the plateau valley, where the weather remains relatively mild even in severe winters.

[...] ⁸⁸

This sense of warmth from Pema Tseden’s homeland is most vividly portrayed in *The Silent Holy Stones*. In the feature-length version of *The Silent Holy Stones*, the filming is relocated to Chentsa County in Malho Prefecture; however, the shooting sites, Gulang Dike and Ko’u Monastery, are both perched at elevations ranging from 2100 to 2300 meters, bearing striking geographical similarities to Guide County.

⁸⁷ Jiangnan is one of the most prosperous areas in China in the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, including the southern part of its delta. The region includes Shanghai, as well as parts of Jiangsu, Anhui, Jiangxi, and Zhejiang provinces.”

⁸⁸ Some parts of the essay have been omitted for length.

This resemblance imbues the village, celebrating the Tibetan New Year with a warm and comforting ambiance. In another example, *Tharlo* too conveys a profound sense of solitude. It was filmed in the surroundings of Dzona village in Lazewa township, where Pema Tsenden lived during his childhood. Most of his films are shot in the Amdo region, occasionally featuring other Tibetan areas. His film text itself functions as a historical event, and illuminates the internally diverse history of everyday life, aesthetics, society, and culture in Tibetan regions. It also sheds light into the geographical and climatic depths of field of the *longue durée* history.

The more significant interpretation of the Tibetan name for Trika is the place where Tri Ralpachan⁸⁹ built a pagoda to propagate the Dharma. The flourishing Nyingma tradition in the Trika region is precisely rooted in the teachings of Padmasambhava, upon which the emperor Tri Ralpachan subsequently relied. The pronunciation of “Wanma Tsenden” is derived from the Amdo Tibetan language of his hometown. If pronounced according to the Lhasa region’s U-Tsang Tibetan dialect, it would be “Bema Tsenden” (Pema Tsenden). “Wanma” (Pema) means “lotus flower,” and “Tsenden” means “lasting life.” The translated name chosen by Mr. Xu Xiaodong, “A Lotus with Tenacious Vitality,” (Xu, 2017, p. 42) may vividly capture his description, embodying the profound influence of Tibetan Buddhism, the lineage of Padmasambhava, and even the significance of his name on Pema Tsenden. Reflecting on his childhood, Pema Tsenden mentioned:

⁸⁹ Tri Ralpachan (ཁྲི་རལ་པ་ཅན། 806-841 AD) was the eighth ruler of the Tibetan empire.

My grandfather was a very devout Buddhist. He was the first person in our village to erect prayer flags at our home. He was skilled in various handicrafts, including printing scriptures and making prayer flags. When I was in the fourth or fifth grade, the school started reintroducing Tibetan language courses, and we began learning to read and write in Tibetan. My grandfather tasked me to transcribe some borrowed Tibetan scriptures. In those times, printed scriptures were quite scarce, and most were painstakingly transcribed by hand. I distinctly remember transcribing relatively thin scriptures such as the “Padmasambhava’s Condensed Biography.” Following the transcription, I had to memorize them, which was quite a painful process. (Pema Tseden, Xu Feng, 2017, p. 42)

In 2006, Pema Tseden collaborated with Tibetan writer and poet Wangchuk Tseten (དབང་བུ་ཆེ་བརྟན།) on the book *The Master in Tibet*. They utilized the *Biography of Padmasambhava* (Yeshe Tsogyal, 1990), primarily grounded in the recorded, compiled, and discovered termas by Yeshe Tsogyal (757/777-817, ཡེ་ཤེས་མཆོ་བྱུང་།), Padmasambhava’s consort, as their main foundational reference. This was complemented by their in-depth study of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*,⁹⁰ allowing them to retell the story of Padmasambhava in thirteen chapters (Pema Tseden and Wangxiu Caidan, 2006). The number thirteen, which is often considered ominous in Western culture, symbolizes the state of great perfection in Tibetan esotericism. Thus, even in the mere count of

⁹⁰ Wangxiu Caidan (དབང་བུ་ཆེ་བརྟན།), correspondence with Xu Feng, 13 October 2023.

chapters, one can discern the underlying script of the Tibetan Buddhist cultural tradition. In 2007, he filmed the documentary “Kathok Grand Ritual” about the ritual ceremonies of Padmasambhava at Kathok Monastery in Palyul County, Kandze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. In the same year, he directed a documentary film titled *Samye Monastery*, which focuses on Padmasambhava’s propagation of Buddhism in Tibet.

For thousands of years, from the Tibetan calendar to the core Tibetan medical treatise *Gyushi* (རྒྱུ་བཞི།), Buddhism has permeated every aspect of Tibetan life. But to Pema Tsenden, the cultural identity shaped by *longue durée* historical development is not to simply accept and believe. As a contemporary Tibetan intellectual, his study and dissemination of Tibetan Buddhist culture present a trajectory of exploration and reflection. This is partly attributed to his 53-year life experience, a social history full of fission. Since the new era,⁹¹ Tibetan Buddhism, which had suffered catastrophic events, has experienced a revival. However, this period of Tibetan cultural renaissance is also an era of simultaneous advancement in Sinicization, modernization, and globalization. All of Pema Tsenden’s films deal with profound cultural conflicts and complexities as his inquiries and self-reflection became global.

The Cinematography of Tibetan Modernity amidst the Impact of Eastern Cinema on the West

From the late 20th century to the early 21st century, filmmakers

⁹¹ The “new era” refers to the end of the Cultural Revolution and the opening of China.

from Iran, China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and other countries continued to reshape the vision of global cinema. This marked a distinctive period in the history of filmmaking, signifying that, at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, Eastern films exerted a second reverse influence on Western films (the first being in the 1950s). Pema Tseden was active in this trend.

Certainly, the driving force behind the continuous evolution of Chinese cinema, the authorial strategies and spiritual aspirations of Abbas Kiarostami (1940-2016) and the whole Iranian film industry, the profound integration of experimental filmmaking and Buddhist undertones in avant-garde practices by the Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul (b. 1957), and the emergence of oversea Tibetan language films by the Tibetan/Bhutanese lama and filmmaker Khyentse Norbu (b. 1961) have collectively become the paratextual backdrop for the productions by Pema Tseden. In this context of the progress of Eastern cinema's influence on the West, Pema gradually made his mark. However, he had to confront the misunderstandings and prejudices stemming from the Han ethnic-centric viewpoint towards Tibetan culture, the political instrumentalization of the Tibet issue, and the fascination with exoticized Tibet by the West, as well as a series of cultural taboos within Tibetan culture itself. The challenges he faced in his filmmaking journey strengthened Pema's affinity with Iranian cinema, especially the works of Abbas Kiarostami.

Abbas was the earliest renowned filmmaker to recognize Pema Tseden's talent and is acknowledged as his mentor. Amidst the strict cinema censorship system in Iran and Abbas's film texts, we find the tension between ideological taboos and the exploration of spiritual life,

along with aesthetic sublimation pathways between them. Partly due to the constraints of the filmmaking environment, Pema Tseden's films in the first half of his creative career exhibit a distinct documentary style. However, the insightful Kiarostami, while serving as the chairman of the jury at the Busan International Film Festival in 2005, did not categorize Pema Tseden's style as purely documentary. Instead, he placed it within "the tradition of Robert Bresson and Yasujirō Ozu" (Asia Society, 2005). This indicates that, for both Kiarostami and Pema Tseden, documentary aesthetics were evidently only the initial conditions of their art, while the essential goal lies in the spiritual insights possessed by the gaze behind the camera.

In general, Pema Tseden significantly differs from Bresson's anti-theatrical concepts in cinematography (*cinématographe*) and modeling (*modèle*). Wan Chuanfa believes that Pema Tseden's film, involving "the construction of repetitive scenes, a focus on the use of zero visual narrative perspective, and the application of threshold composition," (Wan Chuanfa, 2017, p. 55) demonstrates, to a certain extent, its potential resonance with Bresson's cinematography and spiritual exploration. *The Silent Holy Stones* is a scene of children participating in Tibetan opera rehearsals shot in the documentary style of Kiarostami. By employing the silent observation effect of zero visual narrative perspective, camera positioning, and the repetition of Tibetan opera melody, it disseminates the nurturing of compassion that circulates through daily life, extending even into the constant state of Buddha nature.

Pema Tseden's early films are similar to the works of Yasujirō Ozu, as both delve into the contemplation of time alongside the anguish of traditional ethical loss. However, Pema Tseden's understanding

of modernity and time differs significantly from Yasujirō Ozu's forbearing and contented works. In his cinematography of Tibetan modernity, exemplified in *The Silent Holy Stones*, Pema Tseden captures a young monk's fascination with the TV series *Journey to the West* and his perplexity towards the chaotic singing and dancing scenes. The structural contradiction evident in his earlier works has evolved into profound confusion in *The Search*, reminiscent of the depth found in the *Taste of Cherry* (Kiarostami, 1997). It's not individual fate but a question of cultural survival.

One of Pema Tseden's most documentary-style films, *The Search*, was filmed in southern Gansu and the Malho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai Province, where the Amdo dialect of the Tibetan language is spoken. But it represents a transformation that the entire Tibetan region experiences. Utilizing a consciously polyphonic structure, the film takes the search for the lead actor of "Drime Kunden" (འཇིགས་ཀྱི་ལྷ་མོ།, one of the Eight Great Tibetan Operas) by the film crew as its main narrative thread, traversing through the Tibetan region. It introduces four parallel 'love stories': the love recounted by a businessman, a girl's search for her boyfriend, the love of the fictional director, and the compassionate love of Drime Kunden that everyone seeks.

Drime Kunden was a prince practicing *paramita*⁹² before he was

⁹² "Paramita" means "perfection" in Sanskrit. In Mahayana Buddhism, there are six *paramitas* (patience, virtuous conduct, wisdom, etc.) and they must be practiced by the practitioner aspiring to Enlightenment (or Buddhahood). Drime Kunden is famous for practicing the perfection of generosity.

reborn as the Buddha. With unparalleled compassion, he selflessly gave away his kingdom, wife, children, and even his eyes. Of course, all of this ultimately returned to his life as a result of his practice. The film not only showcases the evolution and crisis of Tibetan opera art but also reveals the internal tremors of faith and even everyday emotions. The search for the ‘performer’ of Drime Kunden highlights the absence of unconditional love. In contrast, various worldly loves portrayed exhibit impermanence, disturbance, and anguish. On their journey, the group not only encounters forgetfulness, abandonment, and questioning of the story of Drime Kunden but also confronts criticism and mockery of worldly love. Modernity is no longer the emotional turmoil caused by a television set but the irreversible reality of contemporary survival. The film, adopting a basic shooting style emphasizing ‘distance,’ meticulously captures and structures various ‘micro-storms’ of cultural reality, allowing us to witness the fundamental erosion of seemingly unchanging cultural traditions on the plateau.

The expression discussed above has also been noticed by film critics. In 2009, a special report from the Locarno International Film Festival by the French newspaper *Le Monde* considered *The Search* to be one of the two best films of the festival:

Director Pema Tsenden often films from a great distance to showcase only silhouettes, a moving car, and villages that seem to barely mark the immensity of the landscapes. Subsequently, the film unfolds in a tiny theater or within the car’s interior. At the conclusion of *The Search* (which is not the conclusion of the characters’ quest), one gets the impression of having shared the mourning of a country

witnessing its cultural transformation, under the obvious impact of historical upheavals, at the same time, quite simply, due to the passage of time. (Sotinel, 2009)

However, the director has not entertained the fantasy of reverting to the past, as that obviously is not how he addresses this challenge. What he offers us is an open-ended search without a conclusion, yet gaining a certain understanding, precisely in line with the Tibetan original title རྫོག་པ། (which means “to search”). The name Drime Kunden translates to a pure monk symbolizing the soul-searching of a dedicated practitioner. At the end of the film, the director’s perplexity is a genuine self-inquiry: How to adapt and maintain the essence of tradition within the context of modernity?

We can consider all of Pema Tseden’s films thereafter as a repeated contemplation and a certain response to this question.

Twelve of Pema Tseden’s seventeen films are feature films, and eleven among these, including two short films, are in Tibetan. We observe a gradual decline of Buddhist themes from the beginning, reaching its lowest point in the films *Old Dog* and *Tharlo*. Then they returned and ascended to a new height. *Old Dog* and *Tharlo* are his two most despairing works, reflecting an extremely dark tone to the extent that Abbas Kiarostami’s meaningful documentary style is no longer suitable for his vision. While there has been considerable research on these two works, this essay emphasizes their critical consideration of modernity, corresponding to two seemingly continuous but actually separate stylistic tendencies.

Old Dog presents a rugged and vigorous documentary style, reminiscent of the assessment by the renowned French director Olivier Assayas of Hou Hsiao-hsien's *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983):

Hou Hsiao-hsien's style is simultaneously intuitive, powerful, and contemplative, shedding all studies of glamor and moving towards essence in an exceptionally vigorous manner. This is not only of great significance to Chinese cinema; through starting from scratch in every aspect, he accomplished a true revolution, capturing the world and observing it in his own way... At that time, there was no work in Chinese cinema that came close to this unpolished reality... and the emotions he redeems are precisely this kind of clear understanding. (Assayas, 2009, p. 350)

While Chinese cinema has had a tradition of documentary aesthetics since the "Fourth Generation," in my view, the only work that comes close to this 'unpolished reality' is Jia Zhangke's *Pickpocket* (*Xiao Wu*, 1997). The imagery of *Old Dog* is situated within the stylistic series of *The Boys from Fengkuei* and *Pickpocket*. Some critics exclaim, "The entire film consists of only 111 shots! ... averagely it is 1.08 minutes per shot!" (Zheng, 2018, p. 5). In *Old Dog*, what confronts us is the violently materialistic reality and the desperate struggles of the elderly, blending the unpolished sense of extreme documentary realism with a fable of cultural predicament.

In *Tharlo*, the film systematically incorporates the language discovered by Wan Chuanfa, with a particularly notable emphasis on visual framing. It utilizes closed, incomplete images to highlight

the protagonist's secluded personal life and marginal social identity. However, after engaging in love, the closed frames suddenly open up, as if the world has poured into Tharlo's heart, yet this only reinforces his lonely situation. In this film, Pema Tseden exhibits stronger characteristics of a language of Robert Bresson's style and abstract power. His expression establishes a clear intertextual relationship with the late Bresson's: Bresson's *Money* focuses on a world where everything is commodified, and the protagonist transforms from a victim into a true criminal. This is remarkably similar to Pema Tseden's expression in *Tharlo*, where he portrays the psychological disintegration and loss of beliefs among Tibetan herders in the drastic materialistic transformation of modern society. Similar to Brecht, Pema Tseden pours the fullest emotions into these characters.

In this abstract manner, *Tharlo* undergoes a transformation from the language of extreme documentary realism to the expressive language of cinema. *Tharlo* is also Pema Tseden's final work that comprehensively secularizes and critiques modernity. Starting with the self-consciously commercial film *Sacred Arrow* and officially with *Jinpa*, elements from Tibetan traditional spiritual life once again rise in his films and in the face of the dilemma between cultural tradition and modernity, a more courageous "resilient expression" is progressively strengthened. In a structural symmetry, opposite the narrative of killing in *Old Dog*, there appears the narrative of releasing in *Snow Leopard*.

The Filmic Tibetan Language Towards Spiritual Realism

Wang Xiaolu once introduced the concept of "filmic Tibetan

language.” In a conversation with Pema Tsenden, he remarked, “You have emphasized that the use of [filmic] language in your films should be closely tied to the subject matter and setting. It is impossible to develop something that is unique but without roots, and in your case, those roots are embedded in Tibetan culture and the spiritual world.” (Pema Tsenden, Wang Xiaolu, 2019, p. 14) The geographical and climatic environment, along with the *longue durée* historical accumulation of national culture, has shaped a specific space and a unique perspective on this space, creating a distinctive humanistic form and a way of perceiving people and life. In the presentation of space and time, as well as the relationship between sound, image, and meaning, they contribute to a Tibetan filmic language.

The contrast in artistic expression between Pema Tsenden’s film and fiction is striking. For example, the documentary-style film *Silent Holy Stones* and the surrealistic short story “Holy Stones, Quietly Engraved” share nothing in common. In the story, the old man carving holy stones fulfills his promise, imbuing the narrative with a mysterious quality not only in the dimension of events but also in the atmosphere crafted by the use of simple language (Pema Tsenden, 2014). When discussing the prevalent avant-garde surrealistic style in his own work and even in contemporary Tibetan literature, Pema Tsenden alludes to the influence of Tibetan culture and classical Tibetan literary traditions, which is more common in contemporary Tibetan literature than in contemporary Chinese literature:

In pre-1950s Tibet, or even in some literary works from the early modern era of Tibetan literature, there are many avant-garde, experimental, absurd, and even elements of

so-called magical realism. This continuity may be related to the cultural foundation of the Tibetan region and even influenced by its high-altitude geographical context. (Pema Tseden, Du Qingchun, 2019, p. 19)

And this style, commonly referred to as surrealism, emerged in the later works of Pema Tseden's filmography, including *Jinpa*, *Balloon*, *Snow Leopard*, and *Stranger*.

However, I prefer to replace *Surréalisme* and Magical Realism with a new concept to describe Pema Tseden's style—Spiritual Realism with a broader meaning or Divine Realism with a narrower meaning. The reason for using this concept is that, for a nation with traditional spiritual beliefs (such as the Tibetan people, who universally practice Buddhism), culture and faith are integral parts of the daily reality of its people. Many situations that may seem imaginative or dreamlike to readers or viewers without religious beliefs are not mere imagination and fantasy for believers; instead, they are part of the latter's real world. Therefore, for them, the style genres like surrealism, which juxtaposes dreams and the unconscious with external material reality, or magical realism, which integrates magical elements into realistic descriptions, cannot adequately explain the abundant everyday scenarios and film language phenomena found in works like *Balloon*. For them, these phenomena exist in different dimensions and layers of reality, representing spiritual phenomena, mental images, and spiritual realities. For example, the phenomena of the *bardo*⁹³ and the cycle of

⁹³ Bardo is a Tibetan term referring to “the state of existence from the moment immediately after death until the moment immediately before conception.” (Source: Alexander Berzin's *English-*

reincarnation, for the Tibetan people, are absolute realities, rather than surreal, supernatural, or magical phenomena. Therefore, at least for the Tibetan people and Tibetan artists, in their cultural environment, daily life, and artistic perception, it is not surrealism, not magical realism (they use these concepts more as part of a conventional habit), but a form of spiritual realism where religious beliefs and spiritual culture are fully integrated into everyday life.

In *Jinpa*, the driver Jinpa encounters a man from Kham named Jinpa, an illusory manifestation of his revenge desire, parallel to the Buddhist principle that ‘appearance arises from the mind.’ The spiritual realism in *Balloon* is even more distinct. Pema Tseden’s interpretations of these two scenes contribute to understanding this issue.

In the scene where the nevus representing reincarnation is removed from the elder brother Jamyang in the dream, the two younger brothers take it and run towards the desert. This scene is generally interpreted as a dream, but Pema Tseden sees it as a natural life scene, stating, “In fact, this scene doesn’t really count as a dream; the characters in the story naturally enter such a state of mind” (Pema Tseden, Suo Yabin 2020, p. 92).

In the “spirit in the water” scene, discussed by scholars such as Dai Jinhua, Sha Dan, Suo Yabin, etc., Pema Tseden orchestrates a “surreal” scene with a single shot: the shot begins with the grandson, Jamyang, searching by the water, the camera then shakes down to the

water's surface, projecting an image of the grandfather slowly moving forward with a prayer wheel on the water surface. The camera moves slowly, gradually rising, and then reveals Jamyang walking by the water. This represents what Dai Jinhua referred to as the “Pema Tseden-style long take,” (Dai Jinhua, 2023) showcasing a frigid yet incredibly magnificent play of light and tones. It portrays an atmosphere of *bardo* that is inspired by the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (བར་དོ་སྐོས་སྒྲུབ་ཆེན་མོ།) and links it to the perspective of Jamyang, who is confirmed as the reincarnation of his grandmother in the household.

Pema Tseden's explanation of this scene is self-contradictory:

It's the dream of Jamyang, the eldest son, after his grandfather's death. There was a foreshadowing in the previous plot, saying that his grandfather took care of him the best, and he couldn't let go of his grandfather. After the grandfather's death, on the way to the funeral, this child enters a scene that seems to be a dream” (Pema Tseden, Suo Yabin, 2020, p. 92).

Here, it is initially referred to as a dream, but later, it is described as seeming to be a dream. This difference in interpretation arises because this scene is a detailed depiction based on the philosophy of *bardo*, filled with imagination yet entirely grounded. The intermediate state of death (*bardo*) and dreams share similarities, and images from the intermediate state can be seen in dreams. Therefore, although Pema Tseden uses the common term “surreal,” it cannot be truly called surreal, as it is entirely rooted in the foundational knowledge guiding his everyday life.

This kind of spiritual realism certainly has examples in Western cinema, but the most significant example comes from Eastern cinema, as in the legacy of Kenji Mizoguchi to Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Weerasethakul played an influence on Pema Tsenden with his films *Tropical Malady* (2004) and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Life* (2010), which found a perfect form of spiritual realism within the realm of experimental film, the New Wave, and Eastern cinema. However, let me discuss Kenji Mizoguchi. In the 1950s, when Eastern cinema first influenced Western cinema, his films provided a global demonstration of the language of *mise-en-scène* in this spiritual realism.

In the genesis of the French New Wave in 1959, Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* ranked first in the annual top ten list by *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and *Yang Kwei Fei* secured the ninth position. This admiration is evident as two films by Kenji Mizoguchi made it to the top ten of the year in *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Jean-Luc Godard particularly delved into a specific scene from *Ugetsu*:

After killing the female ghost, Genjūrō returned to his home. Unaware that his gentle wife, Miyagi, had already been killed by robbers, he entered his house and walked through the entire room. The camera followed him with a tracking shot, capturing his movement from one room to another. He left the house, disappearing from the camera's view, and then returned. As he re-entered the room, the flesh-and-blood Miyagi appeared in the frame at the same moment. Like us, he discovered and felt as if he had seen something wrong; his gentle wife was still alive, beautiful, and healthy. (Godard, 1998, p. 124).

Kenji Mizoguchi juxtaposes the actual presence of Genjūrō with the vivid image of his deceased wife in the same frame. In the Western cinematic aesthetic system, this is considered a surrealistic vocabulary, while in Eastern Buddhist philosophy, it represents the manifestation of the *bardo* phenomenon, entirely distinct from André Bazin's image ontology and *mise-en-scène* theory based on the supremacy of the material world.

The artistic form of Eastern cinema has significantly challenged the established boundaries of Western cinema, granting Western directors an unprecedented space for imagination and a new understanding that transcends the binary of reality and illusion. The profound influence of Eastern cinema on Western cinema in the 1950s not only bridged the essential transition between Neorealism and the New Wave but also made the *mise-en-scène* methods from the East a new common language in world cinema. It undoubtedly served as the wellspring for the spiritual realism of Eastern filmmakers. The composition of the scene depicting the ritualistic release of the grandfather in *Balloon*, in the scene of the 'spirit in the water' sequence, resonates with Godard's analysis of similar scenes. Whether in terms of visual form or expression, they share a common lineage.

Pema Tseden embraced this style of spiritual realism in his later works. However, this style might have been present in Pema's film conception at an earlier stage as well. Starting in 2005, he and I, along with Professor Ma Xiuwen from the Beijing Film Academy, initiated the adaptation project for *Le Lama aux cinq sagesse* (*The Lama with Five Wisdoms*). The novel was co-authored by the renowned French woman traveler, novelist, and early promoter of Tibetan Buddhism in France, Alexandra David-Néel (1868-1969), and her adopted son

Lama Yongden (1899-1955). From 2006 to 2015, Pema Tseden worked on three script versions of *Mipham* (Mipham is the secular name of the Five Wisdom Lama before he became a monk.) This story about the reincarnation of a Buddhist person, which he couldn't implement during his lifetime, is a typical example of spiritual realism writing. In 2009, when *The Search* competed at the Locarno International Film Festival, Pema Tseden participated in the project competition "Open Doors" with [the script for] "An Everlasting Day."⁹⁴ In the same year, the plans for *Jinpa* (then titled *The Killer*) and *Balloon* were both approved.⁹⁵ Hence, the stylistic differences between the early and later periods of Pema Tseden's films are majorly influenced by the production conditions. *Mipham* may have preceded films before *Soul Searching*, and *An Everlasting Day* might have come later, both possessing the style of spiritual realism where daily life and dreams intertwine, and literature and poetry are inseparable.

During Pema Tseden's life, which ended so suddenly and too soon, he instilled confidence in the future. Over the past twenty years, through his films, be they documentary-style films or works of spiritual realism, he keenly observed the spiritual lives of Tibetan people, providing nuanced and individualized expressions. In this process, confronting severe real-world challenges and internal struggles, his film texts transform into spiritual portrayals of individuals, contemplating and understanding themselves amidst adversity, resistance, and

⁹⁴ Pema wrote the script but never got to film *An Everlasting Day*. Jigme Trinley, his son, is contemplating pursuing his father's project.

⁹⁵ By being "approved," the author means that both scripts were okayed by the China Film Administration, which is a requisite before filming a movie in China.

anguish. Because he avoids offering universal solutions, his film texts, overall, adopt an open-ended narrative where the experience of suffering unfolds continuously.

Pema Tseden often remarked, “The path down to the mountain is also the way up to the top.” Art evolves through experiencing, observing, expressing, comforting, and reflecting on pain, the agony of vanishing happiness, and the uncertainty of joy and sorrow. It articulates the suffering (*dukkha*) (Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, 2007) and is inherently connected to the suffering. Yet, as we progressively comprehend the struggles in life, consistently ponder the origins of pain, and explore methods to alleviate suffering, we may discover a path to liberation, transforming into a wellspring of happiness through the nurturance of life. This represents the fundamental teachings of Buddha within the spiritual tradition familiar to Pema Tseden. It entails a form of spiritual guidance that more or less transcends our common experiential understanding. As British Buddhist historian Warder aptly summarized:

Its principles are neither vague nor mysterious. Extracted from the early Tipitaka now available, a subset of arguments is derived from the most crucial evidence concerning what is essential. These are mere drops in the ocean, yet we are informed that the taste is not different—that’s the flavor of freedom. (Warder, 1987, p. 486)



Pema Tsenden (left) and Xu Feng (right), Locarno Film Festival, 2009 ©Xu Feng

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PEMA TSEDEN, THE FILMMAKER II

One Balloon and Two Balloons

Chamtruk

(Translated from Tibetan by Dorji Tsering)

Abstract: This short article critically discusses Pema Tseden's *Balloon*. It highlights Pema Tseden's use of intertextuality and conflict in his narrative style as well as employment of particular cinematic styles which create a sense of intimacy with the viewers.

Keywords: Intertextuality, conflict, narrative style, balloon, condom

In Pema Tseden's seventh Tibetan feature film, as in the previous ones, we can see an element of intertextuality. When we observe the whole creative course of this filmmaker, for instance the way he determines the general themes and meanings, the intertextuality seems to create a little tradition, which permeates all his movies. However, the tradition is not permanent or static, rather it flows—the latter follows the previous, and the previous moves forward again. For instance, the condom in the movie symbolizes faith and life, the contradiction between this [life] and the life after. The continuous shot, provided by the extensive employment of hand-held camera, gives a sense of inclusiveness or intimacy to the viewers. The combination of colors and fuzzy images attempts to create an aura of illusion and otherworldliness. All these examples manifest a new identity. This

constant experimentation from one invention to another makes it difficult to bring all his movies under a common genre. To me, this aspect of his movies has both pros and cons.

Just like the lay Tibetan writers since the 1980s have, through various literary forms, foregrounded the conflict between tradition and modernity, Pema Tsenden too, intentionally, or unintentionally, right from the inception of his film career, has adhered to this conflict. Immediately after I watched the movie *Balloon*, I recalled the line from *Hamlet*: “To be or not to be, that’s the question.” The main characters from the movie—Dargye; and his wife Drolkar, Jangchup Dolma the nun; Takbum Gyal the teacher; and the elder boy Jamyang—all are entwined into a net of choices and dilemmas. The stretch of this net is extensive and multi-directional. Even though the movie only narrates the story of a single family, the narrative frame is highly complicated and condensed. This sort of narrative style has been regularly employed since his movie *Tharlo*. Though this feature is rare in Pema Tsenden’s literary works, his movies have made it noticeably striking. This narrative style has also given way to fragmented characters and non-linear plots: one can say, [making a parallel with] the poetic treatise *Kavyadarsha*, that he has employed ‘subtle ornaments’ and ‘inclusive-assertion ornaments.’ These aspects may sometimes give us the impression that some of his movies are a result of a random collection of disparate events. Nonetheless, from the point of view of storytelling and narrative style, it is a trait of maturity. Besides, it offers in passing the grace of an art movie and of a writer’s movie. But a mere collection of events can never form by itself a seamless narration, so with this awareness, if we judge his movies, the level of their excellence ascends.

The balloon itself is an important character of the film, from being a white condom at the commencement to being a red balloon in the end; the grandfather dies and his spirit returns to its home; some of the families in the village face humiliation because of a condom; Dargye and his wife face condom shortage, obtain some and lose some again; the nun returns to the nunnery after having gone begging for donations; Drolkar is being taken from hospital to nunnery; Jamyang shows the intention of discontinuing school; the wishes of the two boys to obtain balloons is fulfilled, yet one balloon bursts and the other flies in the sky. The likes of such occurrences of small events are manifold. Any small event mentioned here has happened or is happening in Tibet. The narration is not indirect, distorted, and hyperbolic. Throughout the course of Pema Tseden's literary career, this effort towards a realistic representation of society is palpable. As always, from this movie too, we can see his realistic lens and disposition.

The condom in *Balloon* is a commodity brought from outside. Some of Pema Tseden's earlier movies too narrated the advent of modern things to Tibet, be it through direct or indirect means, in concrete physical form or in the form of idea. However, the narrative style of *Balloon* is tinged with an element of theatre. In the movie, different people perceive condom in different ways—for some, it is an object of shame while for others a bad omen, again for some it is a commodity to be consumed conveniently while for others it is just a toy. Likewise, we too have witnessed the arrival of new things and different forms of opposition to them. From this, according to me, we can understand that the regular narrative style from his earlier movies has changed and this change has widened the ambiguity with regard to the analysis of the movie. Additionally, this multi-perspective approach

to the condom—as the basis of consciousness, as the cause of death, and as just a balloon filled with air is highly connected with E.M. Foster’s notion of flat character and round character. This is why the characters, at the end of the movie, at different times and in different places, all look at the balloon from different angles.

(The Tibetan version of this review was first published in བཞོ་སྤྱོད་ཡིག་གསར་འགྲུ། *Qinghai News-Tibetan Edition* on 13 November 2020)

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॥ ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॥

收稿日期: 2002-02-28; 修回日期: 2002-04-18; 责任编辑: 李永华

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My Introspection on Watching the Movie *Balloon*

Lhashem Gyal

(Translated from Tibetan by Dorji Tsering)

Abstract: In this review of Pema Tseden's film *Balloon*, Lhashem Gyal reflects on the relationship between the story 'Balloon' and the film, marveling at Pema Tseden's expertise of having the film reach where the story has reached and vice versa. Lhashem Gyal also asserts that the characters in the film are a true reflection of the life of present-day Tibetans.

Keywords: fiction, film, adaptation, representation, characters

Pema Tseden has proved time and again that by bringing the profession of a movie director and a story writer together, the result is mutually supportive, and it is a capacity-building process. After watching the movie *Balloon* directed by him, I had to ponder upon two things.

Firstly, the relationship between the story and movie. I had read his story 'Balloon' long back and had heard later that he was adapting it into a movie. Since then, I had been relentlessly waiting. Just a few days ago, I finally watched the movie. A thought struck me that the ability to make a movie reach where the story has reached and to

make a story reach where the movie has reached is a profession that demands special prowess. This movie of Pema, like his earlier movies, is marked by an air of serenity and tranquility. The images and scenes that come to life on the screen are like simple words from the pages of his story coming to life and soaring. The movie is a faithful adaptation of the story and he attempted his best to make the movie reach where the story has reached. Generally, all forms of narratives have common features, but their representational methods are different, and as a consequence, film and fiction have their own specific representational strength. The story ‘Balloon’ and the movie *Balloon* are like two parts blended perfectly into one due to Pema’s artistic competence. Thus, everything has turned into a naturally elegant artistic composition.

A story-like movie is full of thick features of an art movie, I suppose. Unlike those commercial movies that are commercial success in the movie market nowadays, there are no guarantees that everybody would accept and appreciate such movies on a grand scale. Maybe, it is due to my interest in writing stories! Somehow, I like watching those art films. Especially, their calmness that resembles flowing water, the imperceptible development of emotions, and moreover, the utter silence that follows a rapturous laughter. Pema’s movies always provide me with this experience. This time, after watching *Balloon*, I was left immersed in thinking, supporting my cheeks with my hands.

Many affairs on this planet may have no definitive answers. However, we obstinately hope for one. This is why it might be the same for Pema’s movies—after watching the movie, we may discuss the presence of a single core message that he wants to channel through his art. I too highly expect such concrete message. Those

who watch the movie may evaluate and illustrate it based on their personal impressions. Maybe, this could be the nature of all artistic compositions.

Secondly, it is about how to represent yourself. Up till now, some say when discussing Pema's movies that they aimed at other people, not Tibetans. Others say his movies incorporated Tibetan life. Others still are of the view that his movies are unintelligible. The crux of these different interpretations is all about how Tibetans represent themselves in this age. Indeed. It is only natural to have this acute sense of concern. To date, our representation and introduction to outsiders have been through others' cameras, pens, and discourses. They present us as the unfamiliar, based on their own desire and perceptions. Their portrayal and representation of us may turn us into a kind which even we would find hard to comprehend. Regarding this matter, I think we should feel grateful to Pema Tsenden. Thanks to his courage and capability, an opportunity has come for us to represent ourselves. Through the camera in his movies, he has represented a natural us, which we are acquainted and familiar with, as well as close to. When I was watching this movie of Pema, I felt, how truthful is the world in the movie frame! How artistically we are in it! At one point, when I was reflecting about watching Pema's movie as though reading a story, I finally found the problem that some people have of not being able to instantly accept his movies. Grasping the beauty and depth of artistic work is certainly not something that everybody is capable of. In particular, it is understandable that those who are accustomed to simple and superficial factual narratives may have difficulties accepting the entirety of a movie which uses fiction as its representational method.

How close the characters in the *Balloon* are to our hearts! Dargyé and Drolkar, Takbum Gyal and Jangchup Dolma, the grandfather and the grand-son, even more so Jamyang and the physician Drukto, and other characters, are the illustrations of the fate of all Tibetans of this age. Through his camera, Pema has given us a mirror to look at ourselves. Furthermore, the movie represents us as ordinary as any other people on this round planet; amidst the change of time, we too have our own share of change and stability, progression and regression, fragmentation and completeness, and smiles and tears.

In a nutshell, Mister Pema Tseden can touch through his movies those parts where fiction cannot reach, and touch through his fiction where a movie cannot reach. How could he not be our spokesperson of this age!

(The Tibetan version of this review was first published in མཚོ་ཕྱོད་བོད་ཡིག་གསར་འགྱུར། *Qinghai News-Tibetan Edition* on 13 November 2020)

4. **विशेष** : प्रत्येक प्रश्न के लिए एक अंक है।

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Elucidation from the Inside and Outside: An Analysis of the Tibetan Film *Balloon*

Datsang Palkhar Gyal

(Trans. from Tibetan by Kalsang Tashi) ⁹⁶

Abstract: Writing in poetic prose, Datsang Palkhar Gyal offers to readers the deep layers of meanings in Pema Tseden's film *Balloon*, reflecting on the philosophical and at the same time political issues of existence and transition. He reads the overarching theme of change in *Balloon* vis-à-vis women, time, species, and films.

Keywords: Balloon, change, women, reproduction, time, species, films

By virtue of introducing a range of perspectives and reflections on various topics, the film *Balloon* concentrates on contradictory views between the current situation of human reproduction and local cultures, thus teeming with multiple interpretations about irreversible changes in the present times. The director Pema Tseden, holding the thread of a balloon, counts white and black pebbles of reproduction in the world and birth control.

⁹⁶ The essay was translated from Tibetan by Kalsang Tashi and revised by Françoise Robin.

Indeed, lumping together human life and destiny, human dreams and reality, human opinions and existence, human future and choices, Pema Tseden elaborates a visual story in which all are represented directly and indirectly through a balloon. The balloon, the vital force that shapes the plot of the film, is best described as “the unbearable lightness of being,”⁹⁷ while being heavy for anyone to carry.

If we put specific scenes of the film into words, we can say that they represent the choice between the advantages of religious belief pitted against the disadvantages of samsara; they are like a wheel of contradictions between various interpretations, a tragic scene of the interplay between inner consciousness and outside reality. The ‘balloon’ is the obstacle to life, but it is also what adds pleasure to life. The unfolding garland of lives is both a gateway to transmission and an extra pressure in new modes of life.

In the film, thousands of hopes, each with their own hues, weigh down on a single life and also produce countless sighs. The opinions of the nun, the authoritarian attitude of the doctor, the entrusting hope of Dhargye, the father, and the weariness of Dolkar, the mother are like fierce wind and air breathed into the balloon, producing a plot of love and hate.

Changes and Women

In the history of Tibetan cinema, *Balloon* is the first Tibetan film

⁹⁷ The author alludes to Milan Kundera’s novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

that tackles the theme of the situation of Tibetan women. Its director endorses the viewpoint of women and drawing from his recollections of women's lives and realities, mixes them into the shifting body of women in the 1990s. In between the truth of material life and inner life, the camera shows and evaluates women's fate, women's tears, women's status, and social expectations about women. [...] ⁹⁸ The colour of 'Balloon' signals that the camera enters the colour of life, but actually, making the condom appear as a balloon is a hint either to freedom of giving life or to restrictions to giving life. Both in the past and the present, feminism and women's individual rights are mostly like a broken cup. Patriarchy is an old propensity originating in male domination from ancient times. [...] The dictatorship and tenets of patriarchy that pervade the whole world originate in the labor-intense productivism that followed the end of matriarchy, so patriarchy is a category built upon human nature and nurture.

In the [Chinese] Constitution and as well as in the present world, men and women are declared to be equal, but in reality, in the past as well as now, the inability of women empowerment to overcome male domination seems as natural a phenomenon as flames rising up and water flowing down. Nonetheless, the movie aims at nurturing the freedom of women's inner minds and at providing an opportunity to deflate the constraints that bear on their behavior: in that perspective, it creates images that reflect current times and present opportunities. Dolkar's secret aspirations and renunciation to the pit of samsara produce a faint faith in women's capacities. This may be the wheel of

⁹⁸ A few lines from the original Tibetan essay, bracketed with ellipses in the English translation, are omitted in the translation.

life and death and their karmic retribution, and it may also be a multi-knotted riddle for crossing the desert of present time.

Change and Time

According to ancient treatises, “It is not time that changes, it is the people who change,” but the director’s camera shows that time changes and people change as well. If we adopt that perspective, changes in people are in reality an effect of time, while changes in time are also logically correlated with changes in people’s attitude. [...] Movies are a valuable mode to represent a reflection of social life. The gap between the attitude towards the world that is characteristic of the grandfather’s period, and the way to engage with the world for later generations, is a gap of time. In fact, the transition from one generation to the other involves both respect and cherishing and destruction. [...] The balloons in the movie are an enigma in the eyes of the grandfather; in the mind of Dhargye and his wife, they are like a thread produced by the samsara, but, in the eyes of the children, they are just toys in their playground. These are all different outlooks and perspectives about the world as grasped by different generations. Different perspectives concern various temporalities originating from changes in humanity and environment, drastic contemporary upheavals, and changing times.

Changes and Species

[...] The film *Balloon* indirectly hints at the destruction of species, treating threats to human life and fertility as its themes. It is hard to determine whether the change in species, or evolution, is due to the locality or the weather, but Dargye’s efforts at increasing the

number of his lower land sheep by borrowing a male sheep from the upper lands is a comment about evolution and changes in species. And the movie shows that change occurring in species is a basis for decline.

Looking at today's changes and modern pace in the land of nomads, the degeneration and poor quality of the species of yaks, dogs, horses, and sheep is a bad indication of the mixing of different species. Similarly, relationships between old and new generations in human society, and even inside one single generation, all have gone astray, like a river flowing out of its bed, so that the stability of local cultures and customs cannot be preserved and "fathers whose land is as strong as a palace, and sons whose homeland is as untamable as a tiger's nest," are being destroyed. The film reflects the director's worry about the new history in the evolution and the extinction of species.

Change and Films

The skill of a movie depends on the wisdom of its director, so in this movie, the relationships between the characters and the differences between the generations are differences in the perception of the eight worldly dharmas. It is the emotions, the happiness and sorrow of the characters that come from the eyes of the camera.

These differences are captured through filmic short takes, that evoke mood, happy or sad, and the relationship between characters in the plot.

Time and space determine the quality of the building of the plot of the movie. The transitions in the camera's lens, along with

the transitions that are the basis of the director's story, thanks to the sketchy narrative of *Balloon*, allow us to relate lives of a few people in a given place to the decline of fertility in the whole world.

History has decided that the life of the movie will be long-lasting due to the great wisdom of the producer.

It is historically proven that if a director has a long-term vision, the pulse of his or her films can remain alive.

[...]

The quality of artistry in *Balloon* does not surpass that of *Jinpa*, but in terms of its content, it is unique in the history of Tibetan cinema, since it deals with women's destiny and their timely choices. It is neither a film focused purely on aesthetics nor a film with visual effects aimed at the market. It is characterized by takes of various lengths, the use of numerous nuances of shades, and diverse visual effects. To take an example, the frame with flames flaring up from the fumigation oven or the incense burning at the doorstep unites with the overall image and the soundscape, conjuring up an evocation of the grandfather's cremated corpse and the father's affliction.

Moreover, in *Old Dog* and *Balloon*, as well as other films, the tightly woven pulse of the stories results in visual aesthetics imbued with a capacity to symbolize effortlessly images that are not conveyed through usual aesthetic means. Just taking natural light as an example, the shades and blurriness that form the background of the images contain assuredly countless more narrative treasures answering equally countless visual interrogations. Also, the blurriness of images is always justified by the plot and supports it: for instance, reflections

of characters' figures in the water evoke, through reversed images, the distance and opposition between this life and the next. In *Balloon*, the need to resort to a trembling, hand-held camera work in the manner of a documentary film is strongly linked to the fact that the film has to be interpreted as a story that is true to life, so the documentary style combined with a fictional genre introduces us to the free aesthetics and exploration flowing from the director's wisdom.

In fact, every historical view represented by images in movies is but the beauty of the director's free will.

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Original article, མཆོ་སྤྱན་ཐོད་ཡིག་གསར་འགྲུ། (13 November 2020)

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I am Tharlo

Baima Nazhen

(Translated from Chinese by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani)

Abstract: This prose essay is Baima Nazhen's (Pema Nordrön) personal reflection on Pema Tseden's film *Tharlo* (2015) after she watched the film and feeling stupified for long time until the film unravels to her as a catalyst, helping grasp social changes affecting Tibet and Tibetans.

Keywords: *Tharlo*, ID, cheating, Lhasa, 1980s

1.

After watching Pema Tseden's movie *Tharlo*, everything began to appear confusing. The bright noon sunlight in Lhasa seemed like the reflection of light in a mirror. Despair silently spread in the depths of my heart. I wanted to cry but had no tears; I wanted to leave but had no way out...

I quietly reminisced about Pema's previous movies. Humorous and witty, exulting the beauty of the Tibetan spirit and heart, deeply rooted in Tibetan culture, the characters in his films were lively, pure, and innocent. True and full of details, his early films gave the world

the vastness and fragrance of the Himalayas, the roof of the world. His movies, vividly and thoroughly, conveyed Tibetan traditional culture, popular customs, wisdom, bravery, and compassion. They made me feel that Pema Tsenden epitomized Tibetan cinema. He was the pride of Tibetans and the splendor of world cinema.

It was, however, still impossible to wipe out *Tharlo* from my mind. I came out of the cinema, walked through the noisy Shenli Square, and crossed the street carefully, subconsciously clutching my purse tight. It contained money and the most precious of all, my ID. If I were to lose it, I would be like Tharlo. In that moment, the national pride that Pema's previous movies had given me, had abandoned me. Vigilant, I brought my purse in front of my body and covered it with my hand. I warned myself to be careful at all times, never trust love... All of a sudden, a car honked. In fear, I fell back several steps to let the luxury car speed up. A bunch of people behind me also stepped back letting the car pass by.

In that split second, in shock, I realized that I, we, are all Tharlos.

But at the beginning, I thought I wasn't.

The day before watching the movie, I had read "Tharlo," Pema's short story. It made me smile. It is short, just 7,000 characters or so. Lying down on the warm bed in the bedroom, I contentedly enjoyed Pema's unique writing style: concise, unadorned, and humorous. Almost in every story, he wrote about alcohol. Yeah, how can Tibetans, such joyful people, reject the help of the 'alcohol god' to liven things up!

I smiled again thinking that Pema was a refined man who never drank in excess. Maybe writing about drinking in so many stories was a way for him to experience what would be like to be a man who loved to drink...I effortlessly read several of his short stories, including “The Ninth Man.” No one of them could undermine my relaxed mood until I finished reading “Tharlo.” I decided to read it again, and I felt a bit uncomfortable. I closed the book and thought: Tharlo had an outstanding memory since he was a child; he should have memorized how to recite Chairman Mao’s quotations during the 1960s. Then, he must have met Yangtso, the girl from the hair saloon in the 1980s, just when the reform and opening up [in China] had started. Thinking about this, I felt a bit relieved. The Lhasa of the 1980s has always been remembered fondly by self-loving scholars; so with time, without even noticing it, I also began to believe that it was indeed an era of honesty, where girls like Yangtso would have not existed.

“Maybe those cheating affairs only happened in Amdo, where Pema comes from.” I found a thousand reasons [to convince myself]:

1. The Central Tibetan girls who left agricultural and pastoral areas to work in towns should have felt like they had met a relative the moment they met Tharlo. After all, their own parents, siblings, and fellow villagers were like Tharlo. They were all still back in their native places. Seeing him, they should have felt close to him; they should have looked after him.
2. Tharlo could recite Chairman’s Mao quotations by heart, and he seemed to understand them thoroughly.

The quotations were a norm of conduct, a way of life, even a conviction. But he lived in the grasslands; he should have had his own aesthetic traditions. The appearance of a modern working girl should not have evoked romantic fantasies in him; rather, it should have caused disgust.

3. Most Tibetan farmers and herdsmen in the 1960s in Central Tibet were illiterate, they didn't have the opportunity to attend school. It is impossible they could have known Chinese to be able to memorize, recite, and understand Chairman Mao's quotations. Therefore, those things that happened to Tharlo could only occur in the multi-ethnic Amdo region.
4. In the Lhasa of the 1980s, there was not a single thief. How could there be Tibetan girls tricking one of their own?
5. Even if cheating was possible, the cheater must have been an outsider who had sneaked into Central Tibet, for it's impossible for Tibetans to trick each other.
6. Maybe the short story "Tharlo" was just Pema's prophecy, a way to warn Tibetans that if they continued worshipping money, they would one day harm one another.

Having contemplated all this, I felt those matters were far away

from life and reality and thus drifted into a peaceful sleep.

2.

Early the next morning, I calmly walked into the cinema in Lhasa's Shenli Square. *Tharlo* began to play while I was drinking the cheap fruit juice this movie theater always gives as a promotion.

It was an early show, so there wasn't much audience. After watching it just for a while, everybody was laughing with ease. I also thought this movie would have Pema's consistent style. The moment Tharlo spoke and Yangtso sang, I also began to laugh without giving it much thought. But after half an hour, no one was making a sound. In a daze, I was also staring at the screen: Yangtso was a genuine Tibetan girl! Although she was drinking, smoking, and wearing jeans, her kind face was as familiar as that of any other Tibetan girl! And that Tharlo was not stupid; it could be possible for him to fall in love with Yangtso.

The plot unfolded. The new details and scenes in *Tharlo* that were not in the short story were overwhelming to the point that I was left stupefied. One is written in words, the other is cinematic art. After years of directing, Pema had truly taken the art of cinema to perfection. Every sound and every unremarkable background were seemingly careless but in fact unique in craftsmanship. For example, the husband and wife who went to the studio for a photoshoot: Dekyi, the female photographer whose face is never shown, arranged every single one of the pictures' backgrounds (be it the Potala Palace, Tiananmen Square, or the Statue of Liberty), as well as the clothing, posture, and even the expressions on the spouses' faces. Later on, in Tharlo's simple world of

a shepherd, there were no longer just stars, moons, wolf howls, and the longing *layi* songs. In the lonely black night, when the butter lamp in front of the Buddha flickered dimly, there was a huge electricity tower, standing tall and upright behind Tharlo...

However, electricity and light cannot simply be equated to the luminous moment when Tharlo met Yangtso and fell in love.

But the former shepherdess who came out of the mountains to work in the small county town wanted to travel even farther away...

At this time, I was in awe of every little detail. The hairdryer in the barber shop, the microphone with a wire, the paintings on the wall, the people walking outside, the thermos in the hands of the head of the police station, the lyrics sung by the singer...all flowing continuously like tides.

The storyline was not really complicated, but I felt completely caught up in it... Finally, the movie ended. Yangtso disappeared; Tharlo had to apply for his ID again because he had changed his hairstyle; however, shattered by life and love, he was unable to recite “To Serve the People” fluently any longer.

Tharlo didn’t have an ID, but he was still alive. On the way home or to the county town, his motorbike broke down; he could not go any further. He stopped to catch his breath. Drinking no longer made sense. He took in his hands the double string of the firecrackers he used to scare away wolves and lighted them up: did a shepherd without sheep still need to drive away a wolf pack?

The sound of Tharlo reciting Chairman Mao's quotations echoed like a prayer in the rolling end credits.

3

In a daze, I walked out of the theater. My girlfriend and I walked towards Lhasa's bright noon sunlight, crossed the crowded streets, and headed towards Lukhang Park

At a street corner not far away, women from the countryside were hawking goods at their stalls. In the plastic bags displayed on the ground, there were piles of apples, bought in bulk from mainland traders.

"Brother, I swear to the Three Jewels of Buddhism that these apples were picked from my family's trees."

But that "brother" did not buy them. Turning to the girl on the side who was selling eggs, he asked: "Are these eggs from Tibet?"

The girl selling eggs, similar in age to *Tharlo's* Yangtso, was an authentic Tibetan girl. Her head was wrapped in the typical pink checked headscarf from the countryside. Black sparkling eyes, rosy cheeks, teeth white as snow. She was wearing a thick black woolen Tibetan gown. From the straw frame, she picked up a chicken egg that had a smeared black mark the size of a bird's egg. She then said: "I swear to the Three Jewels and my parents that this is a Tibetan egg laid by a hen of ours that was fed with barley. Look, my grandmother made marks on all our eggs."

The man laughed skeptically, “Does your family grow barley without pesticides and fertilizers?”

The girl looked distracted, as if unable to understand the relationship between Tibetan eggs, pesticides, and fertilizers.

At this moment, my girlfriend and I passed by them, walking at the feet of the Potala Palace by the gate of Lukhang Park. We wanted to go to Lukhang Park to relax for a while. After watching *Tharlo*, both of us felt as if under a spell, confused and uneasy.

“Those Tibetan eggs are fake too; they’re small eggs bought in bulk from mainland peddlers; I’ve seen them with my own eyes!” said my girlfriend angrily. Pointing to the stall keepers selling butter and yogurt outside Lukhang she added, “That butter is fake too, made with potatoes and pork skin. The cream on top of the yogurt is just low-quality mineral oil poured on it!”

“The Lhasa of the 1980s was better!” I said trying to comfort myself. In front of my eyes appeared the image of a *Tharlo* from the era of 80s. My heart skipped a beat.

“Haha, have you forgotten those Lhasa girls in the 1980s who used to run behind Khampa businessmen on motorcycles? Didn’t you write about it in your novels? Who dares to say they didn’t cheat some men of their money?!”

I could not reply to her. I’ve written about it, not only about Khampa businessmen with motorcycles but also those with bulky old

cell phones. I have also written about those Tibetans who in the early 1980s returned to Lhasa from abroad, all of whom were chased by Lhasa girls for their money. After all these years, I had forgotten, until just now, in the cinema, when Tharlo's sheep were bitten to death by wolves, and another grassland Tibetan ruthlessly slapped Tharlo in the face. It felt like I was slapped on my own face, and I remembered everything.

I didn't say anything. Reality had already long changed. I don't say anything because I can deceive myself and be infatuated with the ancient past of my nation.

But I watched *Tharlo*. As if waking up from a dream, as if looking in a mirror, I saw myself.

I am the former Tharlo.

It was when I was four years old, not knowing how to speak a single word of Chinese, wearing a Tibetan robe, suddenly being picked up by my father, my feet leaving the ground, and when my father put me down, I was already among a group of children wearing skirts in Chengdu, Sichuan. From that moment on, it felt like when Tharlo left the grassland. I came to another world made up of photo studios, hair salons, and nightclubs.

When I grew up, I met male Yangtsos, one, or two, worse than Tharlo. I didn't learn my bitter lesson, twice, thrice...

Tharlo's sheep were gone; he did not have an ID; his love and

convictions had vanished. My world was also black and white. That former me, from the former Tharlo developed into the synthesis of Tharlo and Yangtso. Human nature was even more complex, life could not break away from the monochrome.

There are many cables, but not a cultural, so-called, shock. Only a cover. At this moment, I am not only the former Tharlo but also Yangtso, and also the married couple who took photos in the photo studio, living in a totality already fixed, covered, like tiny ants, completely unable to prove my existence.

Sometimes I also fantasize about the future of *Tharlo*. I look in the mirror, and I see the present me, whose head has been shaved by life so many times.

Author's note: The film *Tharlo* was adapted from the short story of the same name by director Pema Tseden. It tells the tale of broken dreams of the lonely shepherd Tharlo, who amidst the twists and turns of trying to get an ID, runs into love. This film adapted from is set in Tibetan areas and shot entirely in the Tibetan language. *Tharlo* in one go has won 12 international film awards.

("I am Tharlo" was originally published in 2015 in Baima Nazhen's personal blog, which is not accessible any longer.)

PEMA TSEDEN, THE PRODUCER

A Network of Kindred Souls: Pema Tseden as Producer and Art Director

Brigitte Duzan

Abstract: Pema Tseden was mostly known in the West as a film director and as a writer. But starting from 2015, when *Tharlo* attracted worldwide attention, he also played an important part that has gone mostly unnoticed until now: that of producer and art director not only for aspiring Tibetan filmmakers, but also for young Han Chinese directors. This paper traces the trajectory of Pema Tseden's contributions towards renewing the Chinese 'cinema d'auteur,' ushering in new aesthetics and themes largely ignored in more mainstream Chinese cinema.

Keywords: Pema Tseden, film producer, art director, Chinese cinema, Tibetan cinema

When Pema Tseden's short but intense career is discussed, he is most often referred to as a groundbreaking filmmaker who created a space for Tibetan films in the People's Republic of China, and as a bilingual writer and translator. But there is a part of his wide array of activities that seldom receives attention, at least in the Western world: that of a producer and/or art director not only of aspiring Tibetan filmmakers but also of other emerging non-mainstream Chinese

directors. In this way, he has exerted an increasing influence on a specific portion of Chinese contemporary cinema, a cinema that would have been dubbed ‘independent’ some ten years ago, but nowadays would better be defined as ‘cinema d’auteur’—in other words, cinema as art, not ‘industry.’ This means a cinema that longs for the best achievements in terms of aesthetics, and not necessarily in terms of box office. As a result, it is a cinema that survives in China at the margin of the official system, in especially difficult conditions in view of screening opportunities, still more than censorship. In the last eight years of his life, and in parallel to his own and busy career as a filmmaker, Pema Tsenden gradually appeared as a mentor of this young and sophisticated cinema d’auteur on Chinese soil.

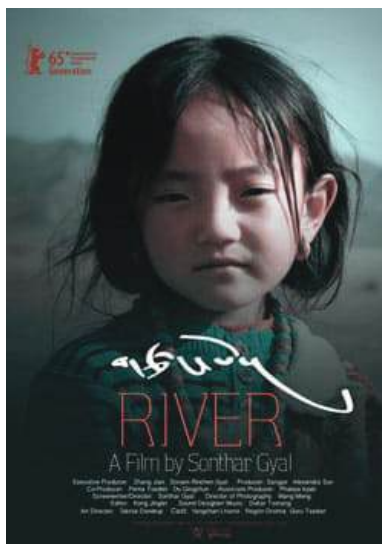
2015: Landmark Year

Pema Tsenden’s activities in the field of film production started in 2015, the very year *Tharlo* (ཐར་ལོ།) was selected and screened at the Venice Film Festival. In that sense, *Tharlo* appears as a real turning point in Pema Tsenden’s career: not only because that film represents a new departure in his own cinematography, but also because it marks a starting point in his recognition as a transnational artist, thanks to his own films, but also thanks to the films he helped to conceive and produce.

He started with the films made by Sonthar Gyal (སོན་མར་རྒྱལ།), initially his director of photography.⁹⁹ He had been the art director of

⁹⁹ Sonthar Gyal was the director of photography for Pema Tsenden’s *The Silent Holy Stones* (སྒྲིང་འཇགས་ཀྱི་མ་ཆེན་འབྲུག།) (2005), *The Search* (འཆོལ།) (2009), and *Old Dog* (བློ་ནན།) (2011). In 2011, he

Sonthar Gyal's first film, *The Sun Beaten Path* (དབུས་ལམ་གྱི་ཉི་མ།), released in March 2011, but in 2015 endorsed the role of a producer, since he coproduced Sonthar Gyal's second film, *River* (གཙང་པོ།), which was in competition at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2015.



Poster of the film River

Later, in 2020, Pema Tsenden worked as the executive producer of Dukar Tserang's (གདུགས་དཀར་ཆེ་མེད།) first film: *A Song for You* (ཁོ་དང་ཁྱོད་ཡི་གཏེར།)—a film coproduced among others by Xstream Pictures, Jia Zhangke's production company.¹⁰⁰

started his own career as director.

¹⁰⁰ Dukar Tserang was Pema Tsenden's sound director; he teamed up with Sonthar Gyal and worked with him for Pema Tsenden's first feature films as mentioned above but continued to work on the sound of *Tharlo* (2015) and *Jinpa* (2018).

By this time, Pema Tseden had developed as a producer and art director and had already become an advisor to young promising Chinese filmmakers, most often helping them make their first films, as we will now turn to see.

2016-2017: Mentor of Young Filmmakers

Pema Tseden was one of the executive producers of the first feature film made by Wang Xuebo (王学博): *Knife in the Clear Water* (《清水里的刀子》), released in October 2016 at the Busan Film Festival (South Korea), where it was awarded the first prize (ex aequo) in the New Currents section. It is worth noting that Wang Xuebo had himself been one of the producers of *Tharlo*.

Knife in the Clear Water was adapted from a short story of the same title by Shi Shuqing (石舒清), a Hui writer from the Northwestern province of Ningxia whose stories reflect his Muslim culture. The particular story chosen by Wang Xuebo is that of an old man who has lost his wife; to celebrate her death's anniversary, his son wants him to sacrifice the old ox which has been his life companion. The film is a series of austere still-life pictures as a kind of mirror of the old man's simple life and environment. It reflects, in subdued colors, the local culture and way of life which are gradually disappearing, and in that sense can be considered similar to Pema's films, in content and form.



A still of father and son from the film *Knife in the Clear Water*

In July of that same year 2016, Zhang Dalei (张大力)ʼs first film, *The Summer is Gone* (《八月》), was in competition at the Xining FIRST Film Festival.¹⁰¹ Zhang Daleiʼs film was awarded a double prize at the Golden Horse Film Festival in Taipei in November and was selected at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2017. Pema was the executive producer of this film, and more than that: it is a black-and-white film and can thus be considered as one of the many films inspired by *Tharlo*. *The Summer is Gone* has the aesthetic feel of a souvenir album or a scrapbook of pictures of the last summer of a boyʼs childhood.

¹⁰¹ That festival is located in the capital city of Qinghai province, on the fringes of the Amdo Tibetan region. It is the last survivor of the festivals of Chinese ‘independent’ cinema of the past and has become over the years one of the most important promoter of young filmmakers in China.



A still depicting the last stroll of the summer in *The Summer is Gone*

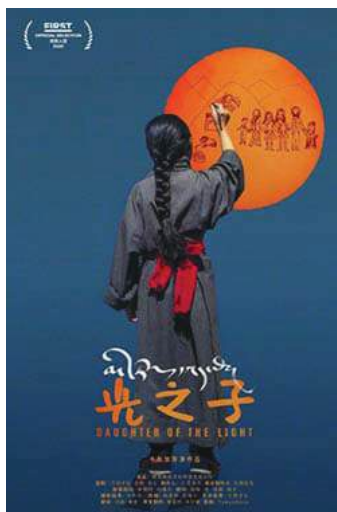
The cinematographer of Zhang Dalei's film was none other than Lü Songye (吕松野), that is, the director of photography who had just filmed *Tharlo*. But, in *The Summer is Gone*, the black-and-white is different, with various tints and shades: it has a sepia tinge to allude to the memory of the 1990s, a greyish hue like mist for daily remembrances, and even expressionist tones for night scenes. The actors are non-professional, which gives a further impression of being close to Pema Tseden's film universe.¹⁰²

Pema Tseden then helped produce a Tibetan documentary: *Daughter of the Light* (འདྲ་གྱི་བྱ་མོ།, 《光之子》), second documentary of Khashem Gyal (མཁའ་བྱམས་རྒྱལ།, 卡先加).¹⁰³ This *Daughter of the Light* is

¹⁰² See Clarence Tsui's review, see <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/summer-is-gone-ba-yue-914912/>

¹⁰³ Khashem Gyal is one of the first Tibetan documentary filmmakers. See introduction by Françoise Robin for the Jean Rouch festival: <https://www.comitedufilmethnographique.com/>

a young 13-year-old Tibetan girl whose parents are divorced and have remarried; she lives in an orphanage, spends her holidays with her grand-parents, but since she has hardly ever seen her father, she decides to go and look for him. The film was awarded the *Colors of Asia* prize at the Tokyo Docs festival in 2017.



Poster of the film *Daughter of the Light*

Khashem Gyal made another documentary about the same little girl, which was in competition at the Xining FIRST Film Festival in 2019. Meanwhile Pema Tsenden made *Jinpa* (ལག་དམར།, 《撞死了一只羊》) and *Balloon* (དབུགས་ལྗང་།, 《气球》), which were released respectively in 2018 and 2019, both at the Venice Film Festival.



Khashem Gyal (left) in the office of Osong Media (the company he created with his two partners in Xining), August 2019, ©Françoise Robin

Pema Tseden went back to production thereafter, as executive producer of two quite exceptional first films by Chinese directors released in 2020, in addition to Dukar Tserang's own film.

2020: Executive Producer of Two Chinese Films

The Land in the River (《河洲》) was the first film of a young filmmaker, Zeng Jiangui (曾建贵), born in 1992. The film has been selected by the Film Lab of the FIRST Film Festival of Xining in July 2020, and then in September of the same year, was awarded a Creative Award in the Venture Capital section of the 4th Pingyao Film Festival.

The title of the film refers to the name of the district of the Gansu province where Zeng Jiangui was born: the autonomous

Dongxiang district (甘肃东乡族自治县) which is the home of the Dongxiang people, one of the fifty-six official ethnic groups of China and, according to official statistics, one of the poorest and least literate. This film is the first one to depict a group of women and children from this ethnic group, with all the dialogues in their specific language, which belongs to the family of the Mongolic languages.¹⁰⁴ As such, this film was intended and conceived as a way to defend and promote the Dongxiang people's culture and language. In this way, Pema Tseden's role as executive producer of *The Land in the River* appears as a move to help defend a minority culture and language threatened by the dominant culture and language in contemporary China, in an approach similar to his defense, in his own films, of the Tibetan culture and language.



Poster of the film *The Land in the River*

¹⁰⁴ See https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_LS_141_0071--new-linguistic-practices-in-dongxiang.htm#:~:text=The%20Dongxiang%20language%20is%20regarded,Field%201997%3B%20Bao%202008

Damp Season (《回南天》), which Pema Tsenden produced that year too, was the first feature film of another young Chinese filmmaker: Gao Ming (高鸣). The idea was here to help a young beginner. The film was produced by Factory Gate, a production company created by veteran film lovers in 2017 which has also produced *Balloon*. It is to be noted that the executive producer of *Damp Season* was Geng Jun (耿军), a very subtle filmmaker who is noted for his specific type of humour noir. In 2016, Geng Jun was also the executive producer of the film made by Wang Xuebo. They all appear as a kind of artistic family, related by similar aesthetic objectives and criteria.



Poster of the film *Damp Season*

2021: Four Productions

In 2021, Pema Tsenden had diversified his production activities, starting with another debut film by a Tibetan filmmaker, Loden (ལོད་འཕྱུག་པ།,

洛旦): Lost (དཀྱུན་ལམ་ཐིང་མོ།, 《迷路》), released in April that year.¹⁰⁵ Pema was the producer of this film, and it was coproduced by Mani Stone Pictures, the production company that was created for *Balloon*. The story of *Lost*—two shepherd families fighting to save their herds of yaks from a snowstorm—is typical of Pema’s film universe and is also a black-and-white film. It was presented at the Hong Kong Film Festival as a “breathless survival thriller and heartbreaking eulogy to a disappearing way of life.”¹⁰⁶



Loden in his motel during the shooting of Lhapal Gyal’s *The Great Distance Delivers Crane*, Amdo, August 2019, ©Françoise Robin

Loden had played a small part in *Balloon*, that of a rickshaw driver who takes the nun to see her relatives during a summer break. He

¹⁰⁵ That initial version was redone on Pema Tsenden’s advice, which shows that his role extended far beyond that of producer in the stricter sense of the term. In August 2023, that second version was still in postproduction stage (personal communication from Françoise Robin, 15 April 2024, after a conversation she had with Loden in August 2023 in Xining).

¹⁰⁶ Françoise Robin, personal communication, September 2023.

was also involved in the shooting of *The Great Distance Delivers Crane* by Lhapal Gyal (on which see below), Pema Tseden's assistant, as he rented out his motel to the crew for the duration of the shooting.



Poster of the film *Lost*

The three other films produced that year with Pema's help are films by young Chinese directors. First, he was the executive producer of *One Man Funeral* (《一个人的葬礼》), first feature film by Chao Fan (超凡), born in 1992. *One Man Funeral* was released at Xining FIRST Film Festival in July 2021. The main character in the film is a forest ranger, who, while patrolling the forest, prepares the funeral of his recently deceased father, meticulously following the precise stages of the ancient rituals. Pema's influence can be felt in the demanding and original aesthetics of the film: it is not only a black-and-white film but also without dialogues, a purely meditative film.



Poster of the film *One Man Funeral*

Before his first feature film, Chao Fan had previously made a short film called *Cattle* (《牲口》) which might as well be one of Pema's stories: an old man has a donkey and a son; the son is studying and borrows money to buy a computer. Years later, the lender wants his money back, so the old man offers his donkey, but he is told the donkey is so old that it can only be given away to the slaughterhouse.

Beyond the Skies (《云霄之上》) by Liu Zhihai (刘智海) is the second Chinese film released in 2021 where the name of Pema Tseden appears in the end credits as producer. This is at first amazing since it appears to be a war movie, not the type of film you would normally associate with Pema Tseden: the story takes place during the war against Japan, as a small group of soldiers of the Chinese army has been ordered to go and blow up an ammunition depot of the enemy within forty-eight hours. The film has been screened in the main official Chinese film festivals, the Shanghai Film Festival in June, and the

Beijing International Film Festival in September. But *Beyond the Sky* is no ordinary mainstream Chinese-style war movie; it is a low-budget film that does not even qualify to be a real war movie. The author of the script is a female scriptwriter, Zhou Jiali (周佳鹂), who wrote a Ph.D thesis on Deleuze.

Liu Zhihai, for his part, claims a “poetical aesthetics” in his filmmaking: the conflict between desire to live and sense of duty, but as a meditation between real and surreal, and again in black-and-white, with images of pure beauty as in a Chinese landscape painting. Pema Tsenden was not only a producer but has also been the advisor for the film’s visual aspects. And again, as in any film by Pema Tsenden, every detail of *Beyond the Skies* has been carefully planned, including the dialogues in the local dialects spoken where the story unfolds (Hunan, Hubei, Southwest of Zhejiang). Liu Zhihai has proposed to call his film a “literary war movie.”



Still of the film *Beyond the Skies*

Among the films coproduced by Pema Tsenden which were released in 2021 must also be mentioned the first feature film made by his son Jigme Trinley (འཇིགས་མེད་འཕྲིན་ལས།): *One and Four* (མི་གཅིག་དང་མི་

བཞི།, 《一个和四个》) was presented at the Tokyo Film Festival in November, and was then in competition in Xining FIRST Film Festival in July 2022. The four characters in the film are played by his father's recurring actors, including Jinpa (ཐྱིན་པ།); and the cinematographer is Lü Songye, who was also the director of photography for *Tharlo*. The film is a terse huis-clos which is more or less in line with the present trend in China's cinema, especially among the filmmakers formed at the Beijing Film Academy like Jigme himself. It can be considered as a sub-genre of the present Chinese *film noir*, with technical aspects perfected under his father's advice.



Poster of the film *One and Four*

Jigme Trinley's debut film can also be considered a sort of experimental trial in terms of production. From then on, Pema Tsedon's activities have been oriented more specifically towards films made by young emerging Tibetan directors.

2022: Support of Tibetan Directors

Pema Tseden was the art director of *Kong and Jigme* (ཁོ་ཁྱེད་དང་འཇིགས་མེད།, 《回西藏》), a film codirected by Chen Guoxing (陈国星) and Lhapal Gyal (ལྷ་དཔལ་རྒྱལ།, 拉华加), the latter one known for his excellent debut feature, *Wangdrak's Rain Boots* (ཐུ་ལྷ་མ་ཐུང་ཐུང་།, 旺扎的雨靴), selected at the Berlin Film Festival in 2018. *Kong and Jigme* tells the story of a Chinese who went to Tibet to work and his Tibetan 'translator'-turned-friend (the script is based on a true story). Two of the actors, Jinpa and the actress Sonam Wangmo (བསོད་ནམས་དབང་མོ།), are familiar faces. Lhapal Gyal has himself served as Pema's assistant for *Tharlo* and *Balloon* as well as executive director of *Knife in a Clean Water*.



Poster of the film *Kong and Jigme*

Pema Tseden was again the executive producer of the next film made by Lhapal Gyal: *The Great Distance Delivers Crane* (《千里送鹤》), released in Xining in July 2022.



Pema Tseden and Lhapal Gyal during the shooting of *The Great Distance Delivers Crane* on the shores of the Kokonor Lake. August 2019 ©Françoise Robin

At the same time, Pema Tseden had developed close relationships with the small production studios which appeared in China in the 2010s and operated like film incubators outside the official circuits (but entirely ‘above ground’), cinema greenhouses like Heaven Pictures which coproduced *Tharlo*, or Factory Gate which coproduced *Balloon* as well as Zhang Dalei’s second film. One should of course make a special mention of Garuda Films, launched in September 2016 by Sonthar Gyal in Badzong (ch. Tongde, Qinghai Province).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ For a short overview of Garuda Films, see <https://highpeakspureearth.com/poem-this-is-how-we-quietly-work-by-gangshun-with-accompanying-essay-by-francoise-robin/>

Pema Tseden had thus gradually established a network of interconnected, wide-ranging relationships, which contributed to his authority as an influential filmmaker beyond the scope of Tibetan cinema per se; and in return, this authority and these ties helped him find the means to produce his own films. As time went by, Pema Tseden's image as a producer emerged as a complement of his image as a director: the image of a filmmaker determined to promote Chinese as well as Tibetan films, based on the same fundamental quality requirements, with a focus on Tibetan films in the last year of his terribly brief career, as if suddenly came to life the Tibetan films he had been working all along to support and promote.

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Pema Tsenden and Brigitte Duzan, Paris, February 2019 ©Françoise Robin

PEMA TSEDEN, THE INSPIRER

In this Year of Many Dreams

Re Kangling

(Translated from Tibetan by Luran Hartley)

—offered to my friend Pema Tseden

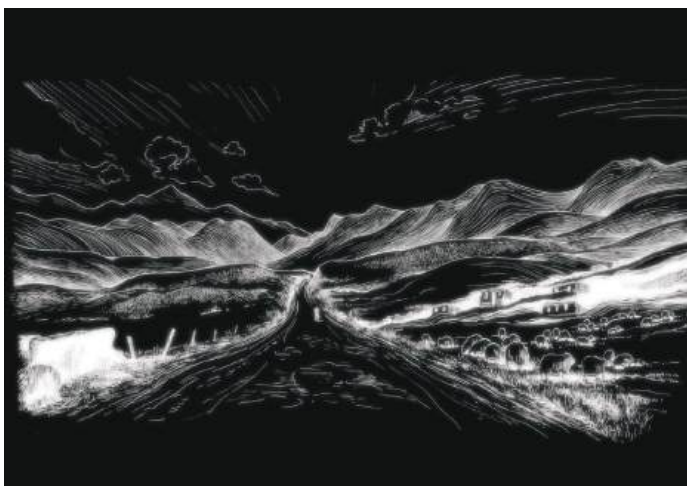
In this year of many dreams,
saddle sores from the horse's back
have been ladled into cupped hands.
Flowers blooming from the veins are
beheld as the cheeks of a young woman.

In this year of many dreams, an
encircling wall of sand was erected
inside a copper mirror.
Sunbeams from all directions
finger the colorful silk knot.

In this year of many dreams,
letters from the faces of stone pillars were
poured into the magician's hat.
A map from amongst the scriptures was
unfurled across the sun and moon.

In this year of many dreams,
no laughter sounds in the rain.
A lineage of echoes, the
Tsangpo River bores into stone.
Just boulders, wetted through.

In this year of many dreams,
a sword of stars has been brandished.
The armor of darkness is dispelled.
Each and every fragment of light
pierces the chest, pierces the heart.



A scene from *Old Dog*, illustration by Kuranishi ©Sernya magazine

མི་ལམ་མང་བའི་ལོ་དེ།

རེ་རྒྱུ་མྱེད་།

གོགས་བསྐྱེད་ཆེ་བཟན་ལ་ཕུལ་བ།

མི་ལམ་མང་བའི་ལོ་དེར

ཉ་རྒྱུ་གི་མ་ཁ་དག

སྒྲིམ་བར་བརྩམས

ཅུ་ལམ་ནས་བཀའ་བའི་མེ་ཉལ།

གཞོན་ལུ་མའི་མཁུར་ཆོས་སུ་སྒྲོམ

མི་ལམ་མང་བའི་ལོ་དེར

ཟངས་གི་མེ་ལོང་ནང་ལ

བྲེ་མའི་ལྷགས་རི་བསྐྱོར

ཕྱོགས་སོ་སའི་ཉི་ལོད

དར་ཆོན་གི་མདུད་པར་ཐེབས

མི་ལམ་མང་བའི་ལོ་དེར

རྩོམ་འཁུར་གི་ཡི་གེ

སྒྲིམ་མཁན་གི་ཞུ་སྐུ་རྒྱགས

སྒྲིགས་བཅ་གསེང་གི་ས་བཀ

ཉི་མའི་གཙལ་དུ་བཀམ

མི་ལམ་མང་བའི་ལོ་དེར

ཆར་བ་ལ་དགོད་སྒྲ་མ་བྱུང

བཀ་ཅའི་རྒྱད་ཀྱི་གཙང་པོ

དོ་ཁོག་ལ་བཞུར

ཕ་བོང་ཁོ་ན་མོ་ཅང་ཅང

མི་ལམ་མང་བའི་ལོ་དེར

སྐར་མའི་རལ་གྱི་གདེངས

ཐུན་བའི་གོ་ཁབ་ཐོར

འོད་ཀྱི་ཆག་བྱམ་རེ་རེ

བང་ལ་བྱག་སྒྲིང་ལ་བྱག

Emanation

Kyabchen Dedrol

(Translated from Tibetan by Norwu Amchok)

—*for Pema Tseden*

you interwove subtle threads of light with the sorrows of humanity
you interwove glittering drops of dew with the law of birth and death
you interwove the colors of saffron with the roars of machines
and you interwove the wails of rivers with the sounds of piwangs

you strewed shards of mind-made pearls across white screens
you crafted flowers from the feet of snow mountains into men and
women
you blurred the distinctions between condoms and balloons
and you created a piece of sky symbolizing samsara

you exorcised time and let out sheep one by one
you made nirvana sputter on the flames of butter lamps
you turned a hairdresser into a thief in the depths of the night
and you made lonely Tharlo descend even deeper into loneliness

you milked the liquid butter of sunlight from the smog of cities
you inscribed red dots of enticement on the cheeks of barmaids

you turned a driver into a killer, making him clutch the knife of
impermanence

and you let all your dreams unfold in the forms of sound and image

as if a movie reel with a masterpiece inside was smashed to bits

your acts of emanation have concluded momentarily—

at the end of the show, the empty screen fills with the tears of the
audience

and the poets too are left momentarily at a loss for words

(Written on May 8, 2023)



A scene from *Sacred Arrow*, illustration by Kuranishi © Sernya magazine

སྒྲུལ་སྒྲུར།

སྒྲུབས་ཆེན་བདེ་གྲོལ།

—བརྒྱ་ཆེ་བརྟན་ལ་ཕུལ་བ།

ཁྱོད་ཀྱིས་འདྲ་བླ་མོ་དག་འགོ་བ་མིའི་སྐྱོ་སྤང་དང་བསྐྱེབས
ཟེལ་བ་ཁྱོམ་ཁྱོམ་དུ་འཕྱར་བ་དག་སྐྱེ་འཆིའི་ཆོས་ཉིད་དང་བསྐྱེབས
ཏུར་སྒྲིག་གི་ཁ་དོག་ཉིད་འབྱུལ་ཆས་ཀྱི་ཏུར་སྐྱ་དང་བསྐྱེབས
ཏུ་མིའི་སྐྱེ་དག་ཉིད་མི་ཁྱད་གི་འདར་སྐྱ་དང་བསྐྱེབས

ཁྱོད་ཀྱིས་སེམས་བྱུང་གི་སྒྲ་ཉིག་ཆག་པོ་དག་བརྟན་ཡོལ་དཀར་པོའི་ངོས་སུ་གཏོར
གངས་འདབས་ཀྱི་མེ་ཉིག་དག་སྐྱེས་བ་དང་བྱད་མེད་ཀྱི་གཟུགས་སུ་བཞེངས
འབྲིག་སྐྱེཏུ་དང་དབྱགས་སྤང་གི་གོ་དོན་འཛོལ་བར་བྱས་ཏེ
འཁོར་བ་མཆོན་བྱེད་ཀྱི་ནམ་མཁའ་ཡུག་གཅིག་བཟོས

ཁྱོད་ཀྱིས་དུས་ཚོད་དམ་ལ་བཏགས་ཏེ་ལུག་རྣམས་རེ་རེ་བཞིན་སྒྲོར་འབྱད་དུ་བཅུག
ཁྱོད་ཀྱིས་མར་མེའི་བླ་བས་ཀྱི་ཁ་དུ་འཆེ་མེད་ཞི་བ་གཡེང་དུ་བཅུག
ཁྱོད་ཀྱིས་སྐྱ་གཞར་མ་ཞིག་མཆན་གྲང་ལ་རྒྱན་མ་ཆགས་སུ་བཅུག
ཁེར་མེད་གི་ཐར་ལོ་སྤར་ལས་ཁེར་མེད་ལ་འགྲོག་ཏུ་བཅུག

ཁྱོད་ཀྱིས་གོང་ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་དུ་སྤྱོན་ལས་ཉི་འོད་ཀྱི་མར་ཁུ་བཞོས་
ཁྱོད་ཀྱིས་ཆང་མའི་འགམ་པར་བསྐྱུ་བྱིད་ཀྱི་དམར་ཐིག་པབ་
ཁ་ལོ་བ་དེ་ལག་དམར་ལ་བསྐྱུར་ལག་དམར་དེ་མི་རྟག་པའི་རལ་གྱིར་འཇུ་བྱ་བཅུག་
ཁྱོད་ཀྱིས་ཁྱོད་རང་གི་མི་ལམ་ཐམས་ཅད་སྐྱོ་དང་གཟུགས་སུ་འཕོ་བར་བྱས་

ནང་དོན་ཕྱན་སུམ་ཆོགས་པའི་བརྟན་ཐག་ཅིག་དུམ་བྱར་ཆད་པ་བཞིན་
ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་སྐྱལ་སྐྱུར་ཀྱི་མཛད་པ་རེ་ཞིག་མཐུག་ཇོགས་
འཁྲབ་ཆན་ཆར་རྗེས་ཀྱི་བརྟན་ཡོལ་སྟོང་པ་དེ་ལྟ་མོ་བའི་མིག་རྩུས་གང་
སྟན་ངག་པའི་སྐྱོ་བའང་རེ་ཞིག་འགག་

A Lone Flower Blighted by Snow

Mukpo

(Translated from Tibetan by Palden Gyal)

On the eighth of May 2023
Some places on the plateau
Still lingered in a flurry of snow.
The suffocating snow,
Its piercing chill,
Froze even teardrops on lashes!

Even the unique flower in beautiful bloom,
Now crystallized in frost's icy gloom,
Its beauty and brilliance now etched in history!
Alas, what a grievous loss!

Upon the petal-pendant's delicate curve,
Nectar that once flowed in abundance,
Now shrouded in oblivious shadows,
Entangled in a web of treachery.
To whom would the mountains and rivers
Now direct their gazing hope?

If snowflakes, drifting from the high lands
And worthy of depiction,
Become a tale of distant exiles,
Where on earth shall we seek tomorrow,
Veiled by an abyss of darkness?

Capturing images and crafting foams
This messenger of the arts,
Where shall we look for him now?
Alas! My eyes fell from the precipice.

(Written in Tsö, on the evening of May 8, 2023)



A scene from *Silent Holy Stones*, illustration by Kuranishi ©Sernya magazine

ཁ་བས་བཅོམ་པའི་མེ་ཉོག་རྒྱང་གཅིག
སྒྲུག་པོ།

སྤྱི་ཟླ་ལྷ་པའི་ཆེས་བརྒྱད་ཀྱི་ཉིན་མོར།
མཐོ་སྒྲང་གི་ས་ཆ་ལ་ལར།
ད་དུང་ཁ་བའི་ཆོས་གར་འཕྱོ།
མགིན་པ་བརྒྱུད་ས་བར་བྱེད་པའི་ཁ་བ་དེ།
ཤིན་ཏུ་འབྲུག།
ཤིན་ཏུ་འབྲུག་པའི་རྒྱུན་གྱིས།
རྩི་མའི་རྩེ་ཡི་མཆི་མའང་སྤྱ་གཟུགས་སུ་གྱུར།
མཛེས་སྒྲུག་གིས་བཞད་པའི་མེ་ཉོག་རྒྱང་གཅིག་དེའང་།
ད་ནི་སྤྱ་གཟུགས་སུ་བསྐྱུར་ཏེ།
མཚར་སྒྲུག་དང་བཀྲགས་མདངས་ལོ་རྒྱུས་སུ་གྱུར་བ།
ཅི་འདྲའི་པངས་བ་ལ་ཨང་།

འདབ་མའི་འབྲུང་འབྲུལ་སྟེང་གི།
སྒྲུགས་མ་ཚར་བའི་གོ་སར་གྱི་ཕུང་པོ།
ད་ནི་ལྷོག་གྱུར་གྱི་གིབ་མོ་དང་ལྷན་དུ།
བསྐྱེད་ཀྱི་རྒྱ་ལ་གདབ་དགོས་པས།

རི་རབ་དང་གཙང་བོས།
རི་ལྷོས་ཀྱི་མིག་འབྱར་སྤྱ་ལ་གཏོད།

ཁ་བ་མཐོ་ས་ནས་འབྱར་ཏེ།
བརྟན་རིས་སྤྱ་འགོད་འོས་བ་ནམས།
ཡུལ་གྱར་བའི་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་དུ་གྱུར་ན།
སྤྱན་བའི་རྒྱ་ལ་བབས་བའི་སངས་ཉིན།
ང་ཆོས་གང་ནས་འཆོལ་ཨང་།

གཟུགས་འཛོལ་ལ་སྤྲིས་མ་འབྲི་བའི།
སྤྱ་ཅལ་ཀྱི་པོ་ཉ་གང་དེ།
ད་ནི་གང་ན་འཆོལ།
ཀྱི་ཏུད། བདག་གི་མིག་རྒྱང་གཡང་ལ་ལྷུང་སོང་།

(2023ལོའི་རྒྱུ་ལོ་ལྔ་པའི་ཆོས་ཀྱི་མཆན་མོར་གཙོས་ནས་བྲིས།)

A Body of Light

Nakpo

(Translated from Tibetan by Palden Gyal)

A Tribute to Pema Tseden

1

Gazing into the distance

Toward the golden brilliance of snow-capped peaks,
As you moved swiftly, faster than words could tell,
I recall the ferocity of a sky intertwined with divine legends.

2

Chased by time's relentless stride,

You traversed unfathomable distances in solitude,
And sought your own shadow, a bodily vessel for future life,
Through the illusory nature of another consciousness.

3

When the splendor of old age

Began to caress your body,
When elusive moments of good health graced you,
All affection vanished like shards in the eye.

4

As we parted at the train station,
The pitch-dark scene enveloping our sight,
Like a dwelling in need of daily petition,
Gleamed from the depths a radiant light.

5

Crossing the forest of destiny, guided by lamp's glow,
Mute creatures abide, in silence they flow,
Yet some elusive whisper now draws near,
Is this the harbinger of your departure, I fear?

6

By your ascent, akin to a slowly arisen snow mountain,
We witnessed a myriad of flowers in the dark sky
Falling amidst a forest of grave inscriptions,
Symbolizing truth in this world.

(Written on May 8, 2023)



A scene from *Tharlo*, illustration by Kuranishi ©Sernya magazine

འོད་ཀྱི་ཕུང་བོ།

ནག་པོ།

—བརྒྱ་ཆེ་བརྟན་ལ་ཕུལ་བ།

1

མིག་གིས་རྒྱང་ལ་བལྟས་ཆོ།

གངས་རིའི་གསེར་མདོག་གི་མཛེས་སྟུག་ཁོད།

ཁྱོད་རང་ཆེག་མཛོད་ཅིག་ལས་སྤུར་བར་འགོ་དུས།

ལྟ་སྦྱང་དང་འབྲེལ་བའི་ནམ་མཁའའི་གདུག་རྩུབ་ཅིས་ཀྱང་བློ་ཡོང་།

2

དུས་ཆོད་ཀྱིས་ཡུན་རིང་བདས་པའི་ཁྱོད།

བགྲང་དུ་མེད་པའི་ཁར་རྒྱང་གི་གོམ་པ་བརྒྱབ་མཐར།

ནམ་ཤེས་གཞན་ཞིག་གི་སྒྱུ་མའི་རང་བཞིན་གྱིས།

ཕྱི་མའི་ལུས་རྟེན་རྟེད་པའི་བར་དུ་རང་གི་གྲིབ་གཟུགས་བཅུལ།

3

གས་འཁོགས་ཀྱི་འོད་སྤང་གིས།

ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་གཟུགས་རིས་ལ་འཁྱུད་པར་བརྩམས་ནས།
ལུས་ཁམས་གཙང་མར་ཡོང་བའི་སྒྲུང་བ་ཐུན་ཅམ་སྐྱེས་དུས།
བརྩེ་དྲུང་ཐམས་ཅད་ཀྱང་། མིག་ནང་དུ་ཆེལ་བ་ཆེལ་བྱར་ཡེལ།

4

མེ་འཁོར་འབབ་ཚུགས་སུ་སོ་སོར་གྱེས་དུས།
ང་ཆོའི་མིག་ལམ་གྱི་སྒྲུན་ནག་གི་ཡུལ་སྡོངས་ནི།
ཉིན་རེར་སྒྲན་ཁྱེད་དུལ་དགོས་སའི་སྡོད་ཁྱིམ་ལྟར།
གཉིང་ཟབ་ས་ཞིག་ནས་འོད་དུ་འཆར།

5

སྡོན་མེའི་འོད་ལ་བརྟེན་ནས་ལས་ཀྱི་ནགས་ཆེལ་བཟུལ།
དེ་དུ་གནས་པའི་སློབ་ཆགས་ལ་སྦྱ་བ་མེད།
སྦྱ་བ་ཐོས་ང་ཆོའི་རྗེས་ཀྱང་བེན།
འདི་ནི་གྱེས་བྲལ་ཐངས་འདིའི་སྡོན་བརྩ་ཡིན་ནམ།

6

ཡུན་གྱིས་འཕགས་པའི་གངས་རི། ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་མཐོ་ཆད་གྱིས།
ནམ་མཁའའི་སྒྲུན་ནག་གི་མེ་ཏོག་སྒྲ་མང་།
འཇིག་རྟེན་འདི་ཡི་བདེན་པའི་ཚུལ་དུ།
དུར་བཞོས་ཡི་གེའི་ཆེལ་དུ་བབས་བ་མཐོང་།

Everlasting Lamp

Gar Akyung

(Translated from Tibetan by Riga Shakya)

—*An elegy to Gen Pema Tseden, the founder of Tibetan Cinema*

from a sky overcast with dark clouds
a rain of tears descends

the weeping that arrives from Lhasa
pierces the ears more sharply than the sound of a golden urn falling to
the ground

if life were to grant me one wish
may those heart stories from Trika resound once more

mortal time expires in such a way
perhaps it's a sign of some earthly logic?

but, when it comes to life's choices
it's hard to tell if there's any reasoning at all

your films made from light
are an everlasting lamp kept aflame by your accomplishments

(written on May 9, 2023, in the light of my quarters)



A scene from *Sacred Arrow*, illustration by Kuranishi © Sernya magazine

རྟག་བརྟན་གྱི་སྒྲོན་མེ།

མགར་ཨ་ཁུང་།

— བོད་གྱི་སྒྲོག་བརྟན་གྱི་སྒྲོལ་འབྲེད་པ་གན་བསྐྱེ་ཆེ་བརྟན་ལགས་ལ་ཐུ་དན་ཞུ།

སྒྲིན་ནག་བཏེགས་པའི་ནམ་མཁའ་ལས།

མིག་ཚུའི་ཆར་བ་བབས་བྱུང་།

ལྷ་ལྡན་ནས་འཕྱོར་བའི་བྱ་སྐད་དེ།

གསེར་བྱམ་ཞིག་ས་ལ་བགས་པའི་སྐྱེ་ལས་ཀྱང་ན་བར་གཟན།

གལ་ཏེ་ཆེ་སྟོག་ལ་རང་དབང་ཞིག་མཆིས་ན།
ཡར་ཕྱོན་གྱི་ཀར་འབྲད་པའི་སེམས་གཏམ་དག་བསྐྱར་དུ་བཏབ་ཆོག་ཨང་།

འདི་ལྟར་བཞུད་འགྲོ་བའི་དུས་ཆེད་དེ།
སའི་གོ་ལའི་གཏན་ཆེགས་ལ་སྐྱེས་པའི་བརྟ་ཏགས་ཤིག་ཡིན་ནམ།

གང་ལྟར་མི་ཆེའི་གདམ་ག་ལ།
རྒྱ་མཚན་ཅི་ཡང་མཆིས་མི་སྲིད།

འོད་གྱིས་གྲུབ་པའི་སྟོག་བརྟན་དག
བྱས་པའི་རྗེས་ལ་འབར་བའི་ཏག་བརྟན་གྱི་སྟོན་མེ་ཉིད།

(སྤྱི་ལོ་༢༠༢༣ལོའི་ཟླ༥ཆེས་༩ཉིན་ལ་རང་ཤག་འོད་སྣང་དུ་སྐྱར་།)

Rainbow

Baima Nazhen (白玛娜珍)

(Translated from Chinese by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani)

Grieving for Pema Tseden la

The thunderstorm shed a night of tears
How can one begin to tell,
Pema la,
that life of yours, brief as a lightning flash

I replay in my mind that time
in a corner of Lhasa,
at the Left Bank Café,
young artists—you and I
I can't recall your words
but remember your kind eyes,
and your calming smile

Later, you travelled through the veins of Tibet
and I could only see you in films
Like the day at the empty, icy Shenli theater
just *Tharlo* and me
After the movie, a blazing sun like white ants

On the pilgrimage road to Lukhang
country folk selling fake Tibetan apples and eggs
I had to bow my head,
And I wrote "I am Tharlo" for your film

Many years passed,
and I always watched your movies,
those in black and white, those in Tibetan blue
Sacred Arrow, above all
In that world you unfolded your dreams,
created your language, your land

At last, you came to Lhasa that snowless winter
loaded with books, wearing your smile
At the book launch, your glinting eyes
bestowed stars on all of us

You sought depth in life and film,
flying farther and farther away,
until the speed of your voyage
surpassed the rate of your heart
'The End' suddenly gave in to the dark night
But it is just a night of rest, isn't it?

Where have you gone?
The tie has slipped away

Now, in a flashback of shadows and lights
I see your life, short as a hand's palm,

like a moment in a myriad long nights
A rainbow in the sky that
cannot be fathomed with time
Your ending is not merely a sigh

I wipe out my tears, by and by
While you walk away,
shutting death's door,
towards the new heaven and earth,
where grass and trees never wither,
where you'll abide for all time.



A scene from *Sacred Arrow*, illustration by Kuranishi ©Sernya magazine

彩虹

一夜雷雨的恸泣

又怎能诉尽

万玛啦

您那短如电闪的人生

现在 只能回放与你的曾经

拉萨拐角处的左岸咖啡

我们还是文艺青年

您说过什么我都忘记了

只记得您温柔的眼眸

您那可平息一切的笑容

以后您沿着藏地的血脉追索

我只能在电影里看您

那天 拉萨冰冷的神力影院空着

只有《塔洛》和我

观影出来 烈日如白蚁

宗角禄康的转经路上

农民正在卖假冒藏地的苹果和鸡蛋

我不得不低下头

为您的电影写下《我就是塔洛》

又过了很多年

我一直看您的电影
黑白的 藏蓝的
最爱的是您的《五彩神箭》
那个世界您沉展梦境
创造了您的王国和您的语言

终于 在拉萨没有雪的冬天您来了
满满的 书卷和着您独一的 笑容
在那场新书推介会上
您的眼眸闪耀着星星的光
照耀着您面前的人们

但您在生活之外
只在电影里纵深
您越走越远的速度终已快过心脏的率动
因此就把猝然的片尾 交给了暗夜吗
那只是一晚的安息吧

但您 去了哪里
以至于 断了 音讯

此刻 电影倒叙着您的光影
我就见您生的年数比手掌还窄
又如万千长夜里的一更
但天上的那轮彩虹
又怎么可用时间计算
您的未了所以并非一声叹息

我就抹去渐渐的泪水

看您关上死的门
因您背转去到的新天新地
那里草木不再凋落
生 将得永恒

(The original poem appeared on May 10, 2023 on the website <https://www.tibetcul.com/wx/zhuanli/zt/42551.html>)

A Long Song of Sadness on the 49th Day

Gangzhun

(Translated from Tibetan by Françoise Robin)

Gratitude to the sun

Gratitude to the moon

Gratitude to the brilliant constellations

Gratitude to the garlands of glaciers and mighty mountains

Gratitude also

To every river that gushes and churns

To every lake that are brimming and bright

And to every wave on the shores of the lakes

Gratitude also

To the meadow grass that grow when pressed down

To each head of livestock—horses, yaks, and sheep

To every flower that blooms brightly

And to every dewdrop on their petals

Gratitude also

To every community located by their god of birth

To every field encircling the communities

To the grains arranged at the ends of the fields

And to every honest community member who works hard to reap the
harvest of grains

Indeed We keep expressing our gratitude for having such a homeland
This land is the playground where we play
This land is where our joyful laughter echoes
This land is suffused with our happy childhood memories
It is from this land that we travel the Land of snow and we circle the
globe
And more: with our ancestors' footprints clearly imprinted on this land,
so
I wish to step across every part of our homeland
I wish to touch every land and river of our homeland

When I am in our homeland
And the green sprouts suddenly bud
I know that spring—the first season—has come
When the ears of grain sway
I know that summer has filled the world with vigor
When hail falls on hills and valleys alike
I can feel that autumn—the auspicious time of harvest—is here
When the snowflakes fly and flutter
I can also feel that winter—a chance for rest—has arrived
When blue, overwhelmingly blue
When colourful, overwhelmingly colourful
When cold, overwhelmingly cold
When hot, overwhelmingly hot
The clear difference between the four seasons
Is indeed the beauty of our homeland

And in the midst of this beauty
While vividly chanting the Tibetan alphabet
We try our best to learn actively what needs to be learnt
We study diligently all that is to be studied
And incorporating the six virtuosities
We muster the courage to live in the world of men

When our youth was still with us
Our aim was to serve our homeland
And, without fear, without hesitation
We fully jumped into the competition of this world
Rising high our swords of wisdom
We hacked in half our enemies, our challenges,
When we were about to shout a *Ki So* of victory
You, suddenly,
Left us and departed far away

You are not in the steps of the cattle
That we herded as children
You are not in the grain fields
That we would cross as youth
You are not in the courtyard of the university
Where we got education as we grew
You are not in the battlefield of samsara
Where we bravely fought together

Your parents say
“You are not here”—and cannot believe it
Your wife says

“You are gone”—and she cannot accept it
Your son says
“You are not coming back”—and he shakes his head

We are helpless
And are left motionless, bewildered
We want to cry, but our tears have dried up
We want to scream, our throat is blocked
Really: when will you return to us?

In the middle of summer
The turquoise dragon returns
Booming with a thunderous roar
The young cuckoo returns
Singing to me a lovely *Ki ki*
A tiny nightingale returns too
Singing beautifully tweet tweet
Despite this
You have not returned
Flowers of all colors have returned
Exhibiting their unrivalled beauty
The bumble bees have returned
Humming with buzzing songs
The seductive butterflies have returned
Performing their enchanting movements
But
You still have not returned

In the depths of winter this year

As the white snows returns
Showing their pure pristine nature,
Will you be able to return?
As the cold winds returns,
Whispering its secrets,
Will you be able to return?
As the New Year return,
Showing a small auspicious smile,
Will you be able to return?

Alas
Each and every hero of the snowy land
When they thus collapse right before my eyes
Each and every talented person of the snow mountains
When they thus are defeated around me
Can I bear to still remain indifferent?

Kayé!
My birth-mountain in Tsongkha, to the east
Mountain Gangkar Riwo, to the south
Mount Magyel Pomra, to the west
The thirteen Gurlha Gods, to the north
Be kind to his beloved children left behind
Provide relief to those who move forward
Grant courage to fighters, should they win or should they lose
Grant your protection to those who rush to help others
Gods and humans united in their might
Are unstoppable. That I have known for a long time.

Note: The translator wishes to thank Rinchen Dorje for recommending the poem and Lowell Cook for his insightful suggestions.



Gangzhun's *phayul* (homeland), August 2023 ©Françoise Robin

ཞེ་དགའི་སྐྱོ་སྤྱི་རིང་མོ།
གངས་ལྷན།

ཉི་མ་ལ་བཀའ་བྱིན་ལྷ།
ཟླ་བ་ལ་བཀའ་བྱིན་ལྷ།
གསལ་ལེར་བཀའ་བྱིན་ལྷ།
གངས་རིའི་ཐང་བ་དང་རྩམ་བཞིན་གྱི་རི་ཆོགས་ལ་བཀའ་བྱིན་ལྷ།
ཆལ་ཆེལ་འབབ་བའི་ཆུ་ལྷང་དང་
ལྷེན་ལྷེན་འབྱུང་བའི་མཆོ་མོ་རེ་རེ་
མཆོ་མོའི་དོགས་གྱི་རྒྱབ་སྤྱོད་རེ་རེ་ཡང་བཀའ་བྱིན་ལྷ།

མནལ་ན་འཕེལ་བའི་རྩ་ཐང་དང
རྩ་ཞོར་ལུག་གསུམ་གྱི་གནག་ལྷགས་རེ་རེ
ལྷམ་མེར་བཞད་པའི་མེ་ཉླ་རེ་རེ
མེ་ཉླ་སྤེང་གི་ཟེལ་བ་རེ་རེར་ཡང་བཀའ་བློན་ཞུ

སྤྱི་ལོ་ལྷའི་འདབས་ན་ཆགས་པའི་རུ་སྤེ་རེ་རེ
རུ་སྤེ་འཐའ་ན་བསྐྱོར་བའི་ཞིང་ཁ་རེ་རེ
ཞིང་ཁའི་སྤུ་ལ་བསྐྱར་བའི་འབྲུ་བྲུག་རེ་རེ
འབྲུ་བྲུག་འབྲས་བྱར་འབད་པའི་གཞུང་བླང་གི་བྲིས་མི་རེ་རེར་ཡང་བཀའ་བློན་ཞུ

རེད་ཡ། ང་ཚོས་ནམ་ཡང་ང་ཚོར་འདི་ལྟ་བུའི་ས་ཡུལ་ཞིག་ཡོད་པར་བཀའ་བློན་ཞུ་བཞིན་ཡོད
གནས་འདི་ནི་ང་ཚོ་ཅེ་བའི་ཅེད་ར་ཡིན
གནས་འདི་ལ་ང་ཚོ་དགའ་བའི་དགོང་སྤྱི་བྲུབ་ཡོད
གནས་འདི་ལ་ང་ཚོ་སྤྱིད་པའི་བྱིས་སློ་ཐེམས་ཡོད
གནས་འདི་ནས་ང་ཚོ་གངས་ལྗོངས་སྤུལ་ཞིང་འཛམ་གླིང་བསྐྱོར
ད་དུང་མེས་པོ་དག་གི་ཞབས་རྒྱུ་ཡུང་རེར་བབས་ཡོད་པས
ངས་ས་ཡུལ་གྱི་ཡུལ་ལྗོངས་རེ་རེར་གོས་ས་འཛོག་འདོད་ཅིང
ས་ཡུལ་གྱི་ས་ཆུ་རེ་རེར་ལག་བས་རེག་འདོད།

ས་ཡུལ་དུ་ཡོད་དུས
སྤྱི་ལྗང་སྤུ་གྱ་ཐོལ་གྱིས་འབྲས་དུས
དུས་བཞིའི་མགོ་མ་དཔྱིད་ཀ་ཐོན་བ་ཤེས་སྤྱབ་ལ
འབྲུ་བྲུག་སྤེ་མ་ལྡེས་ལྡེས་གཡོ་དུས
དབྱར་གསུམ་སྤོད་བཅུད་སྤོབས་གྱིས་ཁེངས་བ་ཤེས

དེ་སྐྱུང་མེད་པར་སེར་ཐེག་སྐྱུང་དུས
 ལྷོན་གསུམ་འབྲས་བྱའི་དུས་བཟང་ཤར་བ་ཆོར་སྐབ་ལ
 ཁ་བའི་འདབ་མ་ལྷ་བ་སྐྱུང་འཕྱར་དུས
 དགྲུན་གསུམ་ངལ་གསེའི་གོ་སྐབས་སྐྱེབས་པའང་ཆོར
 ལྷོ་དུས་སྡོང་ག
 ཁ་དུས་ཁ་འག
 འཁྱག་དུས་འཁྱག་ཆེ
 ཆ་དུས་ཆ་ཆེ
 དུས་བཞིའི་དགྲེ་བ་གསལ་བ་འདི
 ང་ཆོའི་པ་ཡུལ་གྱི་མཛེས་སྤྱད་ཡིན་ངེས
 མཛེས་སྤྱད་འདིའི་ཁྱོད་ནས
 ང་ཆོས་དབྱངས་གསལ་སོ་བཞི་ལྷང་ལྷང་གྱུར་བཞིན
 ལྷོབ་དགོས་པ་གང་ལ་འབད་བས་བསྐྱབས་ཤིང
 སྐྱུང་དགོས་པ་ཐམས་ཅད་བཙོན་བས་སྐྱུངས་ཏེ
 ཅལ་བྱག་ལུས་ལ་སྦངས་ནས
 མི་ཡུལ་གྱི་འཛིག་རྟེན་འགྲིམས་པའི་དབའ་ཁ་བསྐྱེགས།

ལང་ཆོ་འཛོམས་དུས
 པ་ཡུལ་ལ་ཞབས་འདེགས་ལྷ་བའི་དམིགས་འབེན་བཟུང་ནས
 ང་ཆོ་འཛིགས་པ་དང་ཐེ་ཆོམ་མེད་པར
 འཛིག་རྟེན་གྱི་འགྲན་ཚྭ་ལ་ཟད་ཀྱིས་མཆོངས
 ཤེས་རབ་གྱི་རལ་གྱི་མཐོན་པོར་འཕྱར་ནས
 དཀའ་ཁག་གི་དགྲ་པོ་རེ་ཆལ་བར་གསལགས།

མཐུག་མཐར་ཀླུ་ཁའི་གི་བསོ་བསྐྱུག་ལ་ཉེ་དུས
ཁྱེད་ཅག་མོ་བྱར་དུ
ང་ཚོ་དང་བལ་ནས་རྒྱང་ལ་བཞུད།

ང་ཚོ་རྒྱང་དུས་འཆོ་སྤྱོད་སའི
ནོར་ལྷག་གི་རྗེས་ན་ཁྱེད་མི་འདུག
ང་ཚོ་གཞོན་དུས་བརྒྱད་སྤྱོད་སའི
འབྲུ་བྱག་གི་ཞིང་ཁ་ན་ཁྱེད་མི་འདུག
ང་ཚོ་རྒྱས་དུས་ཤེས་བྱ་སྤྱོད་སའི
སྤོབ་སྤིང་གི་ར་བ་ན་ཁྱེད་མི་འདུག
ང་ཚོས་མཉམ་དུ་དབའ་ཁ་བཤེས་སའི
འཁོར་བའི་གཡུལ་ངོ་ན་ཁྱེད་མི་འདུག

པ་མས
ཁྱེད་རང་མི་འདུག་ཅེས་ན་ཡིད་མི་ཆེས
བཟའ་རྒྱས
ཁྱེད་རང་སོང་ངོ་ཞེས་ན་དང་ལེན་མེད
བྱས
ཁྱེད་ལ་ཕྱིར་འོང་མེད་ཅེས་ན་མགོ་བོ་གཡུག

ང་ཚོ་ཅི་བྱ་གཏོལ་མེད་དུ་གྱུར་ནས
རང་རང་སར་ན་ཉད་དེ་ལུས
དུ་བསམ་དུས་མིག་ཚུ་སྐྱམ་ཆར

འཛོད་བསམ་དུས་ངག་སྒྲོ་འགག་ཚར
ངོ་མ་ ཁྱོད་ཉིད་ནམ་ཞིག་ཕྱིར་ཐོན་ཡོང་ངམ།

དབྱར་གཞུང་འདིར
ངར་སྐད་ལྷང་ལྷང་འབྱིན་བཞིན
གཡུ་འབྲུག་སྒྲོན་མོ་ཐོན་སོང
ཀི་ཀི་གསུང་སྒྲོན་སྒྲོག་བཞིན
ཁ་བྲུག་གཞོན་ཅུ་ཐོན་སོང
ཀྲ་ཀྲར་གྲེ་འགྱར་འཐེན་བཞིན
ཁྲེ་ཁྲེ་ཆུང་འཛོལ་མོའང་ཐོན་སོང
ཡིན་ན་ཡང
ཁྱོད་མ་ཐོན་ཐལ
འགན་མེད་ཀྱི་མཛེས་སྤྱད་ངོ་མ་བཞིན
མེ་ཏོག་སྒྲ་ཚོགས་ཐོན་སོང
ཟ་ཟེར་ཀྱི་སྒྲ་སྒྲུ་ལེན་བཞིན
ཀླང་དུག་སྒྲང་མ་ཐོན་སོང
བསྐྱེད་ཀྱི་སྒྲངས་སྒྲབས་བསྐྱར་བཞིན
ཕྱེ་ལེབ་སྒྲེག་མོའང་ཐོན་སོང
ཡིན་ན་ཡང
ཁྱོད་ད་དུང་མ་ཐོན་ཐལ།

ད་ལོ་དགུན་གཞུང་དུ
དྲངས་གཙང་གི་སེམས་ངོ་སྒྲོན་བཞིན

ཁ་བ་དཀར་པོ་ཐོན་དུས
ཁྱོད་ཐོན་སྐབ་བམ
ཤམ་ལུ་གི་སྒྲིང་གཏམ་བཟོད་བཞིན
བསེར་མ་རྒྱང་བྱ་ཐོན་དུས
ཁྱོད་ཐོན་སྐབ་བམ
བཀྲ་ཤིས་པའི་འཇུ་མ་རྒྱང་ངོམ་བཞིན
ལོ་སར་ཆེས་གཅིག་ཐོན་དུས
ཁྱོད་ཐོན་སྐབ་བམ།

གྲེ་མ
ཁ་བའི་དཔའ་མོད་རེ་རེ
ངའི་མིག་མདུན་ནས་འདི་ལྟར་འབྲེལ་དུས
གངས་རིའི་འཛོན་མི་རེ་རེ
ངའི་གཡས་གཡོན་ནས་འདི་ལྟར་པམ་དུས
ང་ད་དུང་འདི་ལྟར་ཉམས་སྒྲུང་མེད་པར་སྡོད་བཟོད་དམ།

ཀྲ་ཡེ
ཤར་གྱི་ཙོང་ཁའི་སྐྱེས་རི
སྒྲོ་ཡི་གངས་དཀར་རི་པོ་
ལུ་གི་མ་རྒྱལ་སྒྲོམ་ར
བྱང་གི་མགུར་ལྷ་བཙུ་གསུམ
ལུ་དུ་ལུས་པའི་གཅེས་སྤྲུག་དག་གི་ཁ་འཛིན་མཛོད་ཅིག
མདུན་དུ་མཆོང་མཁན་རྣམས་ལ་དབྱང་རོགས་མཛོད་ཅིག

རྒྱལ་པམ་ཚེད་མཁན་ནམས་ལ་སྟོབས་ཤུགས་སྦྱལ་ཅིག
དབྱང་ཡར་རྒྱག་མཁན་ནམས་ལ་མགོན་སྟོབས་མཛོད་ཅིག
ལྷ་མི་མཉམ་སྡེ་གི་དབྱང་ཤེད་ལ
འགྲན་ཡ་མེད་པ་སྤར་ནས་ཤེས་ཡོད།

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Brigitte Duzan is a French sinologist, independent researcher, and translator. Her recently published translations include *Funérailles molles* (《软埋》) by Fang Fang (L'Asiathèque, 2019). In 2021, she created a collection of Chinese novellas with the same publisher. She is the translator of Pema Tseden's Chinese-language short stories (*Neige*, Philippe Picquier 2013, *J'ai écrasé un mouton*, Picquier 2022) and has subtitled the Chinese dialogues of "Tharlo." With Katia Buffetrille, she has also translated Tsering Woeser's poems *Amnye Machen*, *Amnye Machen* (《阿尼瑪卿. 阿尼瑪卿》Jentayu, 2023). She is the founder and developer of two reference websites on Chinese literature and cinema: <http://www.chinese-shortstories.com/> and <http://www.chinesemovies.com.fr/>

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Works about Cinema (མཐོག་བརྒྱན་དང་རྒྱུ་ལྷན་ཆོས་འཕེལ་བའི་མཐོག་བརྒྱན་ཅུ་མ་རིག་བཅུ་མ་ཆོས།
Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang).

Dorji Tsering (རྡོ་རྗེ་ཆེ་ལོང་།) teaches literature at College for Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarah, India. His areas of research interest include postcolonialism, diaspora studies, and feminism.

Erin Burke is a Ph.D candidate in Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. She is currently conducting research supported by Fulbright-Hays Program for her dissertation, “The Wise Demoness Writes Back: Tibetan Buddhism and the Popular Religious Imaginaire and Modern Tibetan Fiction,” which explores the relationship between traditional forms of Tibetan and Buddhist narrative and contemporary Tibetan language fiction.

Françoise Robin is a Professor of Tibetan language and literature at Inalco. She specializes in Tibetan contemporary literature and cinema, as well as the emergence of feminism in Tibet. She met Pema Tseden as early as 2002 in Xining, when doing fieldwork about young promising writers. She accompanied him at some festivals as a translator and subtitled most of his films into French. She has also translated a selection of Pema Tseden’s short stories (Neige, 2016), along with Brigitte Duzan. She is the guest editor of the present volume of *Yeshe*.

Gangzhun (གངས་ལྷན།), real name Sangye Gyatso (སངས་རྒྱལ་ལྷ་མོ།), is a poet and an entrepreneur, and also the first Tibetan film producer and a teacher of management. He started as a teacher in Golok Tibetan medium high school and Southwest Nationalities University. Many of his poems and essays have been translated into Chinese, English,

Japanese and French, among others. From 2004 onwards, he has founded eight agencies, such as Beijing Himalaya Film Agency, and has been active in Tibetan cultural industry (films etc.). He is the vice-president of China's Minorities Industry Association, a permanent member of the Qinghai Association of Industry and Commerce, as well as a permanent member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in Malho (Huangnan) Prefecture. He also contributed the article "Modern Tibetan Literature and the Rise of Writer Coteries" to *Tibetan Modern Literature and Social Change* (Ed. By L. Hartley and P. Schiaffini-Vedani, Duke University Press, 2008). While contributing seriously to professionalization of Tibetan cinema, his engagement into production, research, and processing of rye (རྩལ་རྩལ།) has enabled him to commercialize rye to China's national market. Based upon his business experience, he has taught and discussed numerous times about Tibet-oriented economic building, as in his book *The Art of Management* (རྩལ་རྩལ་ཞུགས།). He is currently mainly engaged in setting up the "Himalayan Center for Cultural Industry."

Gar Akyung (མག་ཨ་ཡུང་།) is a poet from Tibet.

Jamyang Phuntsok (འཇམ་དབྱངས་ཕུན་ཚོགས།) is a Tibetan writer and filmmaker. He studied screenwriting at Film and Television Institute of India, Pune.

Jigme Trinley (འཇིགས་མེད་འཕྲིན་ལས།) is a film director and screenwriter. He was born in 1997 in Qinghai Province (China). He graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 2020 with a degree in directing. He has directed several short films, the documentaries *Making Movies on the Plateau* (2017) and *Mr. Red Shoes*, as well as the feature film *One and Four*

(2021), which was nominated for the 34th Tokyo International Film Festival and the Firebird Award of the 46th Hong Kong International Film Festival New Talent Film Competition. He won the Best Director Award at the 16th FIRST Youth Film Exhibition for this film.

Kalsang Tashi (སྐལ་བཟང་བཟའ་ཞེས།) is a Buddhist scholar, lecturer, meditator, yoga practitioner, and classical Tibetan language trainer, living in India.

Kyabchen Dedrol (ལྷུབས་ཆེན་བདེ་ལྷོ།) is a leading contemporary Tibetan poet, essayist, translator, literary critic, playwright, and novelist. He is one of the most active and prolific writers working in Tibetan literature today. Born in Chukhama, Chyokho, a nomadic community in Amdo in the 1970s, Dedrol is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of Butter-lamp Tibetan Literature Website (མཆོད་མེ་བོད་ཀྱི་ཚུམ་རིག་བླ་བ།), one of the most influential Tibetan literary websites in Tibet today, and has published over ten works, including poetry, essays, and fiction. Dedrol has translated numerous Western short stories, poetry, and tech reviews into Tibetan. He also translated the Japanese autobiographical memoir *Totto-Chan: The Little Girl at the Window*, and the Ancient Indian drama, *Śakuntalā* into Tibetan.

Lauran Hartley is Director of the Modern Tibetan Studies Program at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute and Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University. She is also co-editor of the book *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* (Duke University Press, 2008), with Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani.

Lhashem Gyal (ལྷ་བུ་མཆོད་ལྷོ།) is one of the leading Tibetan fiction

authors and intellectual of his generation. Born in 1978 in Amdo, he received an M.A. in Tibetan literature (Central Minzu University, Beijing), and a Ph.D from Southwest University for Nationalities (Chengdu) in ethnology in 2014. He is now a researcher at the China Tibetology Center in Beijing. He has recently published the monography of a typical Tibetan Amdo village, འཇམ་མགོ་འོ་བོད་རིག་པ་དཔེ་སྒྲུང་ཁང་། (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2020) and collaborated with Kuo-ming Sung for Amdo Tibetan: A Comprehensive Grammar Textbook, ཨ་མདོའི་ཁ་སྒྲུང་།, Routledge, 2021). Lhashem Gyal is mostly known for his fictional writings, which include numerous short stories and a novel (བོད་ཀྱི་གཅེས་བྲུག་, Beloved Children of Tibet, Beijing, Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2012; translated into Japanese, French and Chinese). He has also authored several prose essays. He is the only author who has received five times the Light Rain (ལྷ་རྩེ་ཆར་) award for Tibetan literature. He was a friend of Pema Tsenden. Two of his short stories have been translated into English: 'Tibetans of Beijing' (trans. Kati Fitzgerald) and 'Entrusted to the Wind' (trans. Françoise Robin).

Lung Rinchen (ལུང་རིན་ཆེན།) is a Tibetan writer, editor and prolific translator from Amdo. He has published original and translated works in the most prestigious Tibetan and Chinese literary journals. His translations of Tibetophone literature into Chinese have been key in making Tibetophone authors known in China. His penned literary pieces have won many literary awards in Qinghai province, as well as national awards such as the Female Judge Grand Prize in Chinese Literature. He has been shortlisted for the final evaluation of the Fifth Lu Xun Literature Prize. In 2023, he funded the Qinghai Provincial Natural Literature Association, to encourage more writers to do field

work and write about environmental issues.

Michael Monhart (M.A., S.T.M., LP) is a psychoanalyst in private practice in New York and a faculty member at the Jungian Psychoanalytic Association and the Blanton-Peale Institute. He is the author of “Into the Frog Swamp: Jungian Conceptions of the Unconscious in Practice” in *The Unconscious Refracted: Contemporary Psychoanalysis Struggles With Its Source Object* (Routledge, 2020). He is a Tibetan translator and is the co-editor and co-translator of Pema Tseden’s *Enticement: Stories of Tibet* (SUNY, 2018). His publications in Tibetan Studies include essays on Tibetan ritual music (rol mo) and on the 18th century Nyingma lama, Katok Tsewang Norbu.

Mukpo (མུག་པོ།), also known as Nangchak Gyal (སྒྲིང་ལྷགས་རྒྱལ།), hails from Trika, Amdo. He is a prolific author, with his short stories, essays, and poems featured in numerous journals, including *Light Rain* (སྒྲིང་ཆར།). Currently, Mukpo is engaged in research and teaching on Tibetan arts and films at Gansu Nationalities Normal University.

Nakpo (ནག་པོ།), also known as Gadé Tsering (དགའ་བདེ་ཆེ་རིང་།), is an award-winning poet proficient in both Tibetan and Chinese languages. His works have been published in renowned literary magazines such as *Light Rain* (སྒྲིང་ཆར།) and *People’s Literature* (ren min wen xue). A graduate of Gansu Nationalities Normal University, Nakpo is a rising figure in the Tibetan literary scene, with several provincial and national level awards to his credit, including the Ancient Road of Tang-Tibet Literary Award. His poetry has been translated into English, French, German, Japanese, Korean, and other languages.

Norwu Amchok (ནགས་འདོད་ཚེ་བུ།) was born into the nomadic

community of Amchok in Amdo in the 1990s. He is the Chinese translator of *The Barkor Bar* (八廓酒館) published by an independent Chinese publisher and also has a forthcoming collection of English translations of Kyabchen Dedrol's poems.

Palden Gyal (དཔལ་ལྷན་རྒྱལ།) is a Ph.D candidate at Columbia University, specializing in Modern Tibetan and Late Imperial Chinese history. His dissertation delves into the historical dynamics of Tibetan politics in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, examining their interactions with local religious institutions, the Tibetan state in Lhasa, and the Qing court in Beijing since the Qing imperial expansion into Inner Asia in the early 18th century. Additionally, Palden is also an adept translator, skilled in translating poems, essays, and commentaries from Tibetan and Chinese literature into English.

Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani (Ph.D 2002) is Director of Experiential Learning and Humanities Based Undergraduate Research at Old Dominion University (Norfolk, Virginia, USA). She has authored many academic papers and co-edited the reference book, *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* and Pema Tsenden's anthology *Enticement: Stories of Tibet*. Her research deals with Sinophone Tibetan literature. She is the founder of the Tibetan Arts and Literature Initiative (www.talitibet.org).

Re Kangling (རེ་ཀའ་གླིང་།), real name Dorjé Tseten (རྡོ་རྗེ་བཟུང་།) was born in 1979 in Changchup Village, Repkong. After graduating from Huangnan Nationalities Teachers Training School in 1999, he went on to serve as a teacher in a remote nomadic area school. He has published four books, including a collection of short stories entitled *The Palace of*

Trickery in Space (Tib. བར་སྒྲུང་གི་མགོ་འཁོར་པོ་བྲང་།), and a collection of poems, *Symphony of the New Consciousness* (རྒྱལ་ཤེས་གསར་པའི་དགྲོལ་སྒྲིག་རོལ་དབྱངས།)). Currently, Ré Kangling works for the offices of the Huangnan Prefecture newspaper and serves as chair of the Huangnan Writers Association.

Riga Shakya (ཤར་རྒྱ་རིག་དགའ།) is a historian and literary scholar, currently serving as Lecturer in the Literature Humanities program at Columbia University. His interests lie in the connected histories of state and empire building across Tibet, China and the Himalayas, and the convergence between early modern knowledge systems and colonial modernity. He received his Ph.D in Tibetan and late Imperial Chinese history at the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures (EALAC) at Columbia University in 2023. He is currently working on his first project, *Mirrors of History: The Poetics of Tibetan Kingship in the Time of Empire*, which drawing on multilingual archival and literary sources, examines the intersection of multi-ethnic Qing rule, Tibetan literary and historiographical culture, and Buddhist political theory through a study of the 18th century encounter between the Central Tibet under Polha rule (1728-1750) and the ascendent Qing empire, and its legacy through to the modern day.

Stanzin Lhaskyabs (བསྟན་འཛིན་ལྷ་སྐབས།) is a poet from Ladakh and a Ph.D in International and Area Studies from Centre for International Politics, Organization, Diplomacy and Disarmament (CIPOD), School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India. He has published poems in International Studies journals like *Critical Studies on Security and Millennium: Journal of International Studies*. He also writes in journals like *The Wire* and *The Diplomat* on

security, foreign policy, and issues related to Himalayas. He is the author of the first English poetry book from Ladakh—*Himalayan Melodies* published in 2016. Poems of the book are being taught in the University of Delhi, Doon University, and University of Ladakh.

Tashi Nyima is a researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) engaged in the “e-Topia: China, India and Biometric Borders” research project. He completed his doctoral degree in China studies at the University of Oslo, specifically at the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages (IKOS). He is an authorized interpreter in Norway, fluent in Tibetan, Norwegian, Chinese, and English, and possesses basic proficiency in Hindi. His academic pursuits focus extensively on aspects of Tibetan identity, language, and cultural change, as well as on broader subjects such as pastoralism, development discourse, resource management, and digital governance. His research is particularly concentrated on the impacts of China’s development policies in Tibetan regions. Among his recent publications are “Virtual Tibet: Representation, Legitimacy, and Struggles for Democracy” (2024), “Newly Recognized Languages in Chamdo: Geography, Culture, History and Language” (2019), and “Pastoralism in Tibet Today: A Study of Pastoral Policy and Practice” (2019).

Tenzin Tendhar (བསྟན་འཛིན་བསྟན་དར།) is a freelance Tibetan digital artist and illustrator from Dharamshala, India. With more than eight years of experience in creating illustrations, arts, and graphic designs, he remains curious and fascinated by the art of creating cartoons and animation. He pursued his degrees in fine art with major in digital art and 2D classical animation.

Tsering Wangdue (ཆེ་འིང་དབང་འདུས།) was born in Lhasa. He graduated from the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Varanasi (India) with the title of acharya. After teaching Tibetan language for seven years in India, he reached France as a refugee in 2017. He was recruited at Inalco as Tibetan language instructor in 2021. He is the co-author of *Spoken Tibetan: Practical Exercises 2* (to be published, Inalco Press), with Camille Simon and Françoise Robin.

Tseten Tashi (ཆེ་བརྟན་བཟ་ཤིས།) was born in Nagchu (Kham, Tibet, present-day Qinghai province) and was educated as a traditional thangka painter. For his stunning debut in *Snow Leopard*, Tseten Tashi plays a monk who entertains a very special relationship with snow leopards, whom he likes to observe, photograph, and protect. For his performance, he scored a jury special mention at the 30th Asian Cinema International Film Festival (FICA, France) in February 2024.

Wei Duan is a head of school, teacher trainer and special education counselor with over thirty years of experience in the fields of early childhood education and psychology. She has lived and worked in the field of education in the Tibet Autonomous Region, as well as in Tibetan-populated areas in Sichuan and Qinghai.

Xu Feng obtained his Master's degree from the Beijing Film Academy in 1998 and subsequently pursued doctoral studies in Film Studies at the University of Paris VIII, where he later held a visiting professorship in 2015. Since 1998, he has served as a distinguished professor in the Department of Film and Television at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. Widely recognized for his scholarly contributions to the

field, Professor Xu is particularly esteemed for his extensive research on French cinema. In addition to his academic endeavors, Xu Feng has organized over twenty film festivals, both in China and in France. His collaborations with esteemed filmmakers such as Pema Tseden, Sonthar Gyal, and Xu Haofeng underscore his profound impact and influence in the cinematic domain.

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SPECIAL ISSUE



བོད་ཀྱི་སྒྲོག་བརྟན་གྱི་སྒྲོག་ཤིང་ཆེན་པོ་ཆོ་བཟན་ལགས་༡༩༦༩-༢༠༢༣ གཤམ་གྱིས་འདུད་རྗེས་བྲན་ཞུ་བ།

A Tribute to Pema Tsenden (1969-2023), the Life-tree of Tibetan Cinema

Guest Edited by Françoise Robin